

12

JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE

WANDERING
WITCH
The Journey of Elaina





WANDERING
WITCH
The Journey of Elaina





THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA
+ CHARACTERS

SARIO
A mage out to capture the latest scoop on photo.



HENRIK
A fine young exorcist. Uses a diverse set of tools to drive away demons.



EMERY
A dark elf. Traveling for a particular purpose.



LUCILLE
A young girl who never smiles. She is led around by a mysterious benefactor.





WANDERING WITCH 12

The Journey of Elaina

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WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

12


NEW YORK

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Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Translation by Nicole Wilder

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CHAPTER 1

The Story of a Certain Traveler

She turned the page.

Her hair was ashen. Her eyes were lapis. The young woman was dressed in a black pointed hat and a black robe, with a star-shaped brooch upon her chest. The brooch signified that she was a witch, the highest position among mages.

She was a witch, and she was also a traveler.

She was free to wake up whenever she liked. She was free to sleep whenever she liked. She had been spending her days wandering aimlessly from one place to the next.

And she was just beginning another day of total freedom.

“.....”

On the terrace of a café, the young woman looked up from her book and casually surveyed her surroundings.

There were very few people on the streets, perhaps because the city was just beginning to wake up, and a tranquil air hung over the place beneath the rays of the rising sun.

Listening carefully, the young woman heard a waitress setting down a cup on a nearby table. A moment later, the aroma of coffee wafted delicately overhead. At the same time, she remembered that her own coffee had grown cold and that there was hardly any left in her cup.

In a hurry, she finished the remaining coffee, called over the waitress, and ordered a refill.

Then she lowered her gaze once more and continued her story.

Since she was in an unfamiliar place, she thought that maybe she should go out and enjoy some of the local cuisine or perhaps visit the tourist attractions.

But she just glanced down at her watch and decided to stay put at the café until she had finished her book.

After all, her journey would continue later that day, and the next day, too, so she still had plenty of time. She could postpone seeing the sights and sampling new foods.

For the moment, she simply wanted to immerse herself in the story before her.

By the way...

...This traveling witch who had been spending a lazy morning lost in a book—who on earth could she be?

That's right, she's me.

And I'm invested in this story, so I'm turning the page.



CHAPTER 2

An Expedient Species

Whenever there is smoke rising above a forest, it usually means one of two things. The first is that there's a fire. The second is that a group of travelers are probably just preparing a meal.

On that particular day, I stumbled across the latter.

There were lots of wagons and people when I arrived.

They seemed to be setting up camp. Beside the wagons, there were a number of people putting up tents, others were carrying and preparing cooking ingredients, and several were patrolling the area, carrying firearms—it must have been quite a large household. In my immediate vicinity, I could already see that there were more than ten tents, and it looked like the number of people was nearly double that.

“.....”

The longer I watched them, the more I realized how strange and imposing the people seemed.

Every one of them, without exception, had cloth covering their mouth, and they were all wearing thick spectacles over their eyes. They wore matching outfits with long sleeves, exposing almost no skin. The men and the women were dressed the same, and it was almost like I was looking at several copies of the same person.

They seemed like a very peculiar bunch, which was why I ended up standing near their campsite for a while, my head tilted in confusion.

That was when one of the people patrolling the campsite noticed me.

“A traveler?” It was a man's voice. “This area is dangerous. You'd better not come too close.”

My, my...

“Is there danger nearby or something?”

“We *are* the danger.”

I see... Apparently, it's not just their appearance that's imposing.

“Well, there's no real reason why I need to approach a bunch of strangers I just met on the road in the middle of the forest, so I don't mind leaving, but...” I looked at the many wagons I could see lined up behind the man. “What is it that you and your group are transporting?”

He turned around, following my gaze.

They were right in the middle of unloading their *cargo* from the caravan.

From one of the wagons, one after another, the *cargo* stepped out using their own legs. They took faltering steps, their hands tied together with rope. They disembarked with hollow, lifeless looks on their faces.

Others were carried off another wagon on stretchers.

Their blank faces were staring up at the sky.

Every last one of them was wearing an identical expression.

After watching the proceedings for a short while, the man turned back to me.

“Ever see anything like 'em before? They're dark elves.”

Then he revealed himself to be a dark elf hunter.



I'm not that knowledgeable about the elven race.

I know they typically have blond hair and blue eyes, that their ears are a little long, that members of either sex are often beautiful, and that they have perpetual youth and longevity, or something close to it, living several hundred years or more. They truly are a fortunate bunch to be blessed with such attractive qualities, and it is said that they primarily live in forests far away from human settlements.

Dark elves, on the other hand, are not a subspecies of elves but rather a separate, closely related species.

Their hair is silver, and their eyes are gold. Their ears are also long, and their skin is dark. But aside from a swap in color palette, the differences between

elves and dark elves pretty much end there. Dark elves are also known to live in forests and have long life spans.

If there was one glaring difference between the lives of elves and dark elves, it's that dark elves are much more likely to suffer from persecution. For some reason, it's a common belief among humans that all dark elves are evil.

I've met many dark elves over the years, but even before my very first encounter with one, I was aware of their unfortunate stigma.

It's a funny thing, isn't it?

Back then, I was barely five years old, and yet...

"Come here, Elaina. Hold Mama's hand."

...The day I first encountered a dark elf was the same day a little exhibition was being held in my hometown.

Walking down the street, there were people, people, and more people, all holding books. All down the street and into the town square, there were many tents set up side by side. Fluttering everywhere were signs proclaiming the wonderful plot twist of some popular book, or that a certain book had astonished its readers, or that everyone who read a particular book had been deeply moved, or imploring customers to purchase a certain book because it was funny.

It was a festival held by book lovers for book lovers.

I was taking part in the festivities, being led by the hand by my mother.

"Mama?" I asked. "Where is Niche's book? I don't see it."

"Hmm? Niche's book?" My mother gave a noncommittal answer: "...You already have a copy of Niche's book, don't you?"

"I want more than one."

"Oh, why?"

"One for preservation, one for propagation, and one for appreciation."

"Now, where did you learn words like that?"

My mother shrugged and smiled. Then she laughed in exasperation at her

daughter, who only ever read that one book. She assertively grabbed books from the tents that lined the street, purchased them one after another, and tossed them into the bag on my back for me. “Read a wider variety of books!” she demanded.

Even as I protested that I wanted another copy of Niche’s book, I was filled with euphoria each time I felt the weight of a new book on my shoulders. I was easy to please back then.

“Is there anything else you want, Elaina?”

“The Adventures of Niche.”

“Right, anything other than that?”

“Oh. Well...”

I held my mother’s hand, chattering away incessantly, wrapped in feelings of slight exhaustion and excessive joy. Together, we walked through the festival that they hold once a year, even to this day.

That’s when it happened.

“—Ah!”

My eyes landed on one spot in particular.

I let out a small gasp.

Across the crowds of people coming and going down the street, I could see that leaning against the wall of a house was a lone woman engrossed in reading a book. Even though she was wearing her hood low over her head, maybe because I was so short at the time, I could see her beautiful face clearly.

The fact that I remember her well even now is surely because she was an enchantingly beautiful person. Either that, or maybe because underneath her hood, she was hiding features that differed from those of normal humans.

“...?”

The woman noticed my eyes on her and looked up from her book.

Her golden eyes looked down at me. The long ears under her hood twitched.

The person standing there was a dark elf.



“.....”

I remember being surprised that the first dark elf I had ever seen in my life was blending in unexpectedly well in town. I had read in a book that dark elves lived in the forest, far from human settlements.

But they must not have liked to attract too much attention—the moment our eyes met, the elf snapped the book she had been reading shut and placed an index finger against her lips.

She gestured for me to keep quiet.

She made me promise not to reveal her existence to anyone else. She must have really hated attracting attention.

Either that, or perhaps there were people in my hometown who would take issue with a dark elf being there.

So I nodded to her.

“What’s the matter, Elaina?”

My mother was puzzled when I stopped abruptly and stared off into space.

She must have been even more perplexed when she followed my gaze toward the wall of that house. Because there wasn’t anyone there—certainly not a dark elf.

The dark elf had vanished without a trace.

As if she had never existed in the first place, she had disappeared like a momentary vision or something from a dream.

I knew that even if I told my mother what I had just seen, she wouldn’t have believed me.

So I shook my head and adjusted my hold on my mother’s hand.

“Um, nothing.”

Then we started walking again.



Assuming my childhood memory was correct, I was five years old the first

time I encountered a dark elf.

The second encounter was about a month ago.

I had arrived at a city, in the center of which I could see a beautiful fountain.

Pillars of water stretching toward the sky opened and bloomed like flower petals at their zenith, before breaking apart. They turned into a sprinkling of drops that scattered and fell into the pool below, causing ripples on the surface.

This fountain plaza was apparently often used as a meeting place, regardless of the weather or the day of the week. It was unfortunately overcast the day I arrived, and it was an afternoon on a weekday, but still there were all sorts of people meeting up in front of the bubbling fountain.

“Hey, honey!”

“I’ve been waiting for you, darling! Well then, shall we go?”

There were, for example, a man and woman who were obviously in very good spirits.

“Ya brought the stuff we talked about, right?”

“Heh-heh-heh, ’course I did, boss...”

Or there were a couple of guys who gave off a slightly suspicious air.

“No way!”

“So cool!”

“Super cute!”

Not to mention the gaggle of chattering girls idling nearby with nowhere else to go, making empty conversation.

Such sights unfolded before me, as they always did.

However, this fountain seemed to have an aspect to it that differentiated it from a simple meeting place.

There were also people there who had come to the plaza for a different purpose.

“...Please, let my husband’s illness be cured.”

A coin hit the water's surface with a splash, accompanied by words of longing.

"Please, let me find love."

"Please, let my missing friend turn up."

"I want to be rich."

One after another they came. I watched the fountain from a distance for a while before I noticed it, but from time to time, a person would appear and toss coins into the fountain along with wishes such as these.

All sorts of people offered up their prayers. Men, women, the elderly, and children all cast their money and their wishes into the fountain.

"Please, let me..."

Among them were mysterious women wearing hoods pulled down low over their faces, like the dark elf I had encountered in my childhood.

What on earth are they doing? I wondered.

The person who cleared up my confusion was the proprietor of an inn that was situated within view of the fountain.

When I wandered inside, I was welcomed by the proprietor with a somewhat puzzling greeting that made it seem like he had something he wanted to tell me. "This is the luckiest inn in the city," he said.

"Does something good happen when you throw coins into that fountain?" I asked.

"Oh, don't you know the legend of the fountain?"

Those were the words I got in response.

A legend.

"What would that be?"

"Oh my, you really don't know, do you? That's rare these days..."

"I mean, I *am* a traveler, so..." *Of course I'd be unfamiliar with local rumors.*

"I see." The innkeeper nodded. "The fountain over there is known as a lucky fountain, you see. And it's said that if you throw coins into it, your wish will

come true.”

The innkeeper seemed to be accustomed to such questions, because after that, he told me the legend of the fountain, or whatever, in such vivid detail that it was like he was reading from prepared notes.

It was a tale from several decades ago, when the city was still locked in a war with one of its neighbors.

A certain woman, wishing for the safety of her lover, who had gone to the front as a soldier, tossed a coin into the fountain and offered up her prayer. Day after day, she visited the fountain and tossed a coin in. No matter how badly the city fell into ruin, nor how much strain she was under, the woman traveled to the fountain every single day to toss a coin in and pray for the safety of the man.

Even when she was robbed, even when water ceased to flow from the fountain, she continued tossing in coins.

From an outside perspective, her habit likely seemed incredibly strange, and eventually, one of the city’s residents tapped the woman on the shoulder.

“Hey, you. If you’ve got so much money to spare, give some to me.”

Back then, resources were hard to come by, and it was a time when everyone was struggling to make ends meet. To some, the woman’s actions were simply wasteful.

No one could tell that the woman herself had been pushing her own budget to the limit by making repeated trips to the fountain. In truth, she couldn’t afford to spare a single coin for others.

“Sure, of course. I don’t mind.”

But the woman offered money to the man who had tapped her on the shoulder.

The following day and the day after that, every time she visited the fountain, the man and his friends or members of his family gathered and would pester her for money.

If someone wanted clothes, she would bring them clothes. If someone asked

for bread, she gave them bread. If there was anyone wanting medicine, she gave them some of hers. The woman distributed a great many things to the people of the city, free of charge.

“Why do you hand out so many things?”

One day, when the woman went to toss her coin into the fountain as always, a local asked her this.

What reward could she possibly be getting from her actions?

“As long as I am reunited with my love, I don’t need anything else,” she answered with a smile on her face.

“I believe the prayers I have offered up, and any blessings I’ve given to others, will come back around and will certainly bring me good fortune one day.”

After that, the woman continued to pray every day. With her compassionate heart, she continued giving hope to all the people of the city and continued praying.

She kept it up until the day her true love returned home.

“That fountain over there is the same fountain from the story,” concluded the proprietor of the inn, finishing the tale. With a satisfied expression, as if he had accomplished something, the innkeeper asked me one question: “How was that?”

How was it? I’m not sure how to answer.

“That story seemed kind of pointless...”

In the end, the people of the city just pestered the woman for money and stuff, and the woman herself seemed damaged and spent the whole story wasting her coins. It does seem like you found a pretty convenient way to turn it into a heartwarming tale, though.

“How can you say that?! A great number of people were helped thanks to that woman! Thanks to her, the residents of the city found the energy to go on, and they managed to supply logistical support to the army at the front. After all that, one of the men to whom she showed generosity even ended up saving her lover in battle! It was an incredible plot twist!”

“Uh-huh...” At that point, I let out a tired sigh. “By the way, how much of that story is true?”

The more I heard, the more it sounded like a fabrication. It was too tidy and frankly seemed a far cry from a true story; it had all the signs of a work of fiction. That’s why I launched that critical question at the innkeeper.

What sort of coldhearted human would want to sully his neat little story? That’s right, it’s me.

“Ha-ha-ha! What are you talking about?” the innkeeper asked with a cheerful smile. “It’s all fiction!”

So apparently, it’s all fiction...

.....

Hmm?

“Fiction, you say?”

“Well, of course! It’s true that our city did go to war, but if there had really been a strange woman tossing coins into the fountain every day, some bad actors definitely would have taken advantage of her. I even looked through the records of that time, and it seems no such woman ever existed.”

“Right...”

“As a matter of fact, the tale I just told you was apparently a story written by some nameless author who had been inspired by the fountain. A woman tosses coins into a fountain, and that brings blessings to many people in the city, and her true love returns to her side. The author seems to have been struck by the idea of all those small connections shifting things in a major way.”

“And ultimately, it allows this inn to be profitable, is that right?”

“Truly, it is the small connections in life.”

I see. So it certainly seems true that this is the luckiest inn in the city.

“By the way, how much is it for a four-night stay?”

As I handed my check-in form to the proprietor, I took a peek in my wallet. Inside was a single gold coin and several silver ones. I had plenty of money to

spare.

The innkeeper answered me.

“Four nights will be one gold coin.”

I had nothing to spare.

“.....” I stared at the innkeeper, narrowing my eyes in irritation. “If this is such a profitable, lucky inn, then surely you’ll have no problem lowering the price a little bit...?”

But the innkeeper laughed cheerfully.

“Ha-ha-ha! My dear customer, I’ll be in a bind if you don’t pay an amount befitting our good fortune.”

Ultimately, I begrudgingly wasted my gold coin, then headed out to do some sightseeing.

There were a number of other tourist attractions in this city aside from the aforementioned fountain. For example, if I went down to the city’s canals, I could take a pleasure cruise and gaze at the colorful cityscape. There were art galleries, museums, and theaters lined up on the waterway, along with a number of stores associated with famous authors. The city had countless other gorgeous sights to see.

It was obvious that the more I walked around, the more I would fall in love with this city. And I had a feeling that my four-night, five-day stay in this place would go by in a flash.

On my first day in town, I went down to the canals.

Come to think of it, about half the routes through the city were canals.

The sights I could see from the canals made it seem as though the city’s main thoroughfare had been replaced right where it was by water. It was a strange and beautiful thing. I flowed right past multicolored houses of blue, orange, yellow, and green in my little gondola.

“All right now, I’m a professional city guide, so don’t worry. It’s gonna be smooth sailing!” the female gondolier reassured me as she steered her little boat.

With a series of exaggerated gestures, she showed me the city.

“Now, Lady Witch, kindly look to your left! There you will see the most famous site in this city, the wish-granting fountain.”

From the canal, I could see the fountain in question spraying water up into the sky. It was a thrilling sight, and close enough that it seemed like the water might rain down on our boat.

“Ooh.” I played along and clapped my hands.

“.....”

While I was clapping, I spotted the hooded woman whom I had seen in front of the fountain earlier, happily holding hands with a man. I didn’t know what she had wished for, but...was it possible that her wish had already come true?

The gondolier paddled her oar again. “Now if you’ll kindly look to your right!”

She informed me, “The building you can see over there is the city art museum! Visiting a place like that will surely make you seem very sophisticated.”

“That’s a pretty rough description...”

“Sorry, I only know the superficial details about a lot of these places...” The gondolier hung her head bashfully. According to her, she was new at the job. “I don’t have much experience as a tour guide yet.”

“I can tell...”

“Plus, I’m not quite myself today...” The gondolier let out a sigh. Her hands stopped paddling the oar, and even the ripples on the water’s surface settled down.

Hmm, I wonder what’s up?

“Kindly look over there.”

She saw my confusion and pointed right at a gondola jetty.

It looked like the place we’d soon be arriving at. But a person wearing a hood low over their head was waiting there. Guessing from the person’s sturdy build, it was likely a man. He was obviously a suspicious individual, and moreover, he

was holding a bouquet of flowers in his hand, so it was fair to assume he was a sketchy character.

Well then, who on earth could this hooded figure be?

“And if you direct your attention over there, you’ll see my stalker.”

The gondolier’s eyes were virtually blank.

“Um...you don’t have to pretend he’s another tourist attraction.”

“Miss Witch... Recently, a suspicious man in a hood like that one has been going around proposing to every cute girl in town, so please be careful.”

“The way you’re acting, are you speaking from experience?”

“Well, something like that.” The gondolier sighed again, very deeply. “But I think it’s probably going to happen to you, too, Miss Witch...”

“Uh...”

What a terribly unprincipled man...

And then after that, the gondola very, very slowly pulled up to the jetty, and events unfolded roughly as the gondolier had imagined they would.

“Hey, you! You’re cute! Marry me!”

In what I assumed was a simple miscalculation, the man in the hood did not so much as glance at the gondolier. Instead, he tried to present me with a ring. He did it so smoothly that it was as if he had been waiting to propose to *me* the whole time.

But the fact that the ring was inscribed with the words FOR MY BELOVED GONDOLIER laid bare his utter lack of follow-through.

“No, thank you.” I disembarked from the gondola without looking at the man. “Please find someone else to marry. I may not look like it, but I am a traveling witch. I’m afraid I don’t have the slightest interest in love affairs.”

“That ruthlessness is just perfect!” he replied. I wondered which part of my rejection I had miscommunicated. “Truly, a cute but strong girl like you would be great!” he continued. “I’m sure all my countrymen will be jealous.” I was sure I had turned him down cold, but the man seemed to grow even more

excited.

“Urgh!”

I recoiled, physically and mentally.

But the man in the hood didn’t seem deterred by that. He stood up and held the ring out to me again. “Let’s get married!”

And then...

“Please stop, mister! You’re bothering my customer!” The gondolier shakily stepped in between us to stop him.

How professional...!

“Please don’t interfere!” the man objected.

“Same to you! Don’t interfere with my business! Stop proposing to every woman who arrives on the gondola docks! It’s annoying!” The gondolier was fuming.

“I’ll stop as soon as one of you—either, honestly—accepts my proposal!”

“Absolutely not! I’d rather die!” The gondolier turned away.

“Oh, I would also rather die,” I added from behind the gondolier.

I would have expected a decent man to be a little hurt at that point.

But Mister Hood was apparently far from a decent man.

“Still won’t accept, huh...? Then I have no choice! I’ll take you by force!!!”

After that incredibly creepy declaration, he began to approach us.

But the moment he moved, something mysterious happened.

“Hup!”

Now, how do I describe this? Suddenly, a gust of wind blew down the gondola jetty, somehow buffeting only the hooded man. It swept him up, leaving only the ring behind.

“What in the world...?”

The man fell straight into the water. He sent up a sizable splash, but in

another mysterious development, the water sprayed everywhere but neatly avoided me and the gondolier.

That almost seemed like magic...

"I think he'll settle down a little bit after that."

Well, I suppose I did wave my wand, after all.

I peered down into the water as I put my wand away.

The man came back up immediately.

"Feisty, aren't you? I knew it. All my brothers will want one just like you!"

I hadn't been able to tell because he was wearing the hood, but the man had an unexpectedly handsome face. He was attractive enough that if he didn't do anything weird and knew how to keep his mouth closed, I could imagine some women actually giving him the time of day.

"It seems that for now, I am defeated!" Still energetic despite being soaked to the bone, the man then added with a nod, "Until we meet again!" and disappeared under the water.

"Um..."

The man, who had suddenly appeared and disappeared just like a tempest, never resurfaced.

"Thank you so much, Miss Witch!" The gondolier sighed in relief. "How can I possibly repay you...?"

"It was no big deal."

"Take this, with my gratitude." She picked up the ring that had fallen nearby and pressed it into my hand.

.....

"Wasn't it made especially for you?"

"Oh, but he handed it to you."

"I don't want it, though..."

"Honestly, I don't want it either..."

There was a minor disagreement on the gondola dock, but ultimately, it seemed fate had decided the ring was mine.

I went back to my sightseeing after that, but thoughts of the strange man kept flickering into my mind and wouldn't disperse.

Truth be told, I had been the tiniest bit curious about him ever since catching a glimpse of his face.

Understand that this was absolutely *not* because he was an attractive guy and certainly not because water had been dripping alluringly off his gorgeous body. I *definitely* hadn't fallen in love with him at first sight. Perish the thought.

His hair had been silver. His eyes had been gold. His skin had been dark.

And the ears of the man who had disappeared into the water had been a little bit longer than those of ordinary humans.

He was a member of the race I'd had the chance to glimpse only once before.

He was a dark elf.



Over the course of my travels, I had never had a chance to interact with a dark elf one-on-one.

This was a unique opportunity, and there were all sorts of things I wanted to talk to him about. But I never saw him again after our first encounter.

On my way back to the inn, I saw townspeople in front of the fountain as always, tossing in coins and making wishes. The legend of the fountain seemed to hold true.

They were there on the first day, and the second day, and the third day, always.

Every day, when I set out from the inn to go sightseeing, or when I came back, I was met with the same sight, over and over again. As if they were trapped in a loop of stopped time, the people kept sincerely offering up their prayers day after day.

"Please, let me—"

Of course, the hooded woman was there as well.

I had no way of knowing just what she was wishing for, and it didn't seem worth going out of my way to ask her, but since I had looked under the hood of the man who had made advances on me at the gondola dock, somehow or other, I couldn't help feeling like the praying woman must also be a dark elf.

"Please, let me—"

After making her prayer, the woman dexterously fiddled with a coin on the tip of her fingers. She spun it around and around, then nodded in apparent satisfaction and flicked the coin with her thumb, sending it flying into the fountain.

The thing that made her seem different was probably the fact that she performed this ritualistic action almost every day.

Then the woman joined hands with a different man from the day before and walked away from the fountain—apparently this woman whose appearance I couldn't see very well had a lot of love affairs, for she joined hands with a different man every day.

If I get the chance, I probably ought to try to talk to her—

With that thought, I set out for another day of sightseeing.

That was the fourth day of my stay.

The next day would be my final day in the city.

"—My husband's illness is cured! It's a miracle!"

Another woman arrived at the fountain, staggering unsteadily as she passed me, then kneeled down on the spot and looked up at the pillars of water with tears streaming down her face.

Apparently—

—the act of tossing coins into the fountain might not be entirely futile.

Maybe if I also toss in a coin and make a wish that I may be able to talk to a dark elf, that dark elf might make another convenient appearance?

I briefly considered it, but it wasn't something worth wishing for, so I gave up on the idea.

That day, I went to the national art gallery, but when I emerged after soaking up the atmosphere of intelligence in the gallery, it had begun to drizzle, so in order to avoid the weather, I ended up holing up in a nearby café.

I sat there all afternoon, in a window seat, listening to the sound of the rain while engrossed in my reading.

Even as afternoon turned to evening, the rain outside the window did not stop.

“.....”

And—

At that point, I was convinced I had been right and that there was no point in wishing I might be able to talk to a dark elf.

Feeling relieved that I had not wasted a coin, I clapped my book shut and left the café.

I put up my umbrella and walked through the rainy city. The big drops of pouring rain drowned out the sound of people’s footsteps and obstructed my field of vision.

Even so, I was able to clearly see the woman ahead of me.

Apparently, the people of this city weren’t all that kind—because they were avoiding the woman entirely, just as they were avoiding the puddles that had formed on the street.

Perhaps they didn’t want to get caught up in anything troublesome.

No one offered the woman an umbrella.

No one except for me, the foreigner.

“—Are you all right?”

Directly under my umbrella lay the hooded figure of the woman who had been offering up prayers in front of the fountain for the last several days. She appeared to be breathing. Her gold eyes were looking my way. Her silver hair fell gently across her dark skin.

Her long ears were exposed through a gap in her hood.

There before me was a dark elf.



“My name is Emery. As you can see, I am a dark elf of noble birth.”

As she fluffed her hair gently after getting out of the bath, the woman, flushed with warmth, appeared before me again. The way she proclaimed herself to be of noble birth made me think she might be a little off.

In the end, since I had spoken to her, there was no way I could leave her there on the wet road. So I had ended up taking her back to my room. I’d given her food and water to drink, and let her use my bath.

After I waited several minutes, she’d reappeared, spouting that puzzling line.

It goes without saying that I raised an eyebrow.

“Do noble-born dark elves have a penchant for lying in the road?”

“You thought I was doing that because I liked it?” Emery shook her head in disbelief. Then she took a seat on the bed and placed a hand on her chest. “Nonetheless, you helped me. Thank you very much for lending me clothes as well.” Then she moved the hand that was on her chest up close to her face.

“Not at all. Don’t mention it.”

“By the way, this blouse smells wonderful...”

“Could I ask you not to sniff my clothes?”

“But the chest area is a little ti—”

“Huh?”

“Nothing at all.”

Really, how rude.

While I was sulking, I glanced outside. Raindrops pelted the window. The sky was still overcast, and it looked like the rain wouldn’t stop for a while yet.

By the way—

“Do you have some place to go?” I asked the dark elf.

“I do not.” She shook her head immediately.

“And you don’t have a change of clothes, do you?”

“As you can see, I do not.”

She threw out her chest. My blouse groaned wearily as it strained at the seams.

Stop that.

“By the way, how about money?”

“To my great shame, I am penniless.”

“.....”

Which meant, in other words, that if I were to turn her out at that point, saying something like, *“I let you use my bath, so you have no further business here, right? Please leave,”* there was only one fate she could meet.

She would probably end up lying on the road in the rain again. I was certain Emery would find herself facedown on the ground, reminiscing about her hot shower.

That would be far too cruel. Even I have a heart, after all.

“Well then, just for tonight, I can let you stay here.”

Wasn’t it just the most natural thing in the world that such words rushed out of my mouth?

“It’s fine, you don’t need to worry about the money. But to pay me back, I want you to tell me about yourself.”

So I decided that if I could get her to tell me about her hometown and such, I wouldn’t mind letting her stay the night. After all, she was a dark elf. A dark elf! A member of the race with whom I had never had a proper conversation. Such opportunities rarely came around.

Well now, I wonder just what sort of tales I’m about to hear? I’m sure I’m going to get some very interesting and unusual stories. No doubt about that.

I lent her my ear. I listened carefully, excited to hear what sort of stories she was going to share.

“Tell you everything about myself to pay you back...?”

But what on earth do you think happened next?

From that point on, her behavior abruptly became very strange. Her eyes teared up, but there was an eerie light behind them, and she let out a long, hot sigh. There was something odd about her.

“O-of course, I must have misunderstood... I should have known it was too good to be true, to be offered a shower for nothing...”

I really didn't understand why, but it seemed like my words had been translated into some sort of other language in her mind. Still sitting on the bed, Emery placed a hand on her chest, blushed, and turned her eyes up at me, fidgeting anxiously and looking as shy as a schoolgirl.

Uh? What's with this behavior?

Has the heat that warmed her body also gotten to her head?

“Rest assured...I'll put in the work to pay for my lodgings...”

Emery slid a hand over the blouse, and with strangely sensual gestures, undid the buttons.

“.....”

I sank into silence.



At that point, it occurred to me that perhaps this woman was a bit of a fool. But by the time I realized that, it was much too late.

“Go ahead, then... Use me as you will...” With a rustle of fabric, Emery exposed her shoulders.

“...Um, what are you doing?”

“You want to make me say it...?”

“No, it’s just that I simply can’t understand what’s taking place before my eyes...”

This might have seemed like an awfully salacious situation, in which I, a wicked adult, was trying to do something immoral with a young woman who was otherwise ignorant to the ways of the world. But I would have felt terribly guilty taking advantage of her for something as simple as letting her use my shower.

“Um...for now, how about we keep our clothes on?” I said, suggesting that she had misunderstood my intentions. Then I grabbed the clothes she had nearly removed and forcibly re-dressed her.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those who prefers it with clothes on...!” Her expression was the most astonished one I had seen all day.

“What are you even talking about?”

“Or maybe you don’t like girls like me, girls with filthy bodies...?”

“I’m sure the shower you just took washed away any dirt.”

Why do you think I let you use my shower, lady?

“So you’re saying you want to embrace me, just as I am...?”

“Is it possible that dark elves don’t understand my language?”

Though it’s odd, she seems to be taking everything I say in exactly the wrong light.

“None of that stuff is why I’m giving you shelter, okay?” I insisted.

“.....”

Emery answered me with silence, and I placed a blanket around her shoulders.

Then, after wearing a dumbfounded expression for a moment, she began to squirm around under the blanket. "...So you're saying that I'm allowed to stay here, free of charge?" There was bewilderment in her voice.

"No, not free of charge." *I'm sure I mentioned this earlier, but...* "I just want you to tell me about yourself. About your hometown, your family and friends, all sorts of things."

"....."

"Of course, you don't have to tell me things you don't want to talk about. But would you mind telling me about anything you don't have a problem talking about?"

I'm simply interested in the race known as dark elves, that's all.

"Oh, I see..." Her slim fingers gripped the blanket, and she exhaled. "But then, isn't that the same as getting to stay in your room for free?"

"I guess that depends on what you talk about."

But even so, I don't really care what you tell me. Stories that may have no value to you, Emery, might not be the same to me. I just don't know.

She breathed a single sigh.

"This is the first time I've ever been given unconditional love like this."

"You're really overstating things..."

"And you're the first person who hasn't touched me intimately."

"I think that's normal, though."

"Why haven't you asked me why I was lying on the road in the rain?"

"I've decided that you're a weird person who has weird hobbies, so I don't really need to ask."

"But I won't be satisfied if you don't ask me."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Then she said, “I guess I do—” and nodded. “Because this is the first time I’ve had a peaceful night like this.”

—So I guess you won’t be able to relax until you tell me your life story, huh?

Then she began to tell me a story, going on and on endlessly at her own steady pace, like the raindrops pattering against the window.



Apparently, Emery had been physically weak from the time she was small. She had hardly ever stepped outside. She’d spent her days sighing as she watched other children her age playing outside. That was her daily life.

There had been a boy, who it was safe to say was her only friend.

He had lived next door, and from the time they were small, he’d come over to visit at every opportunity. One time, he sat on the bed and told her stories. One time, he treated her to some of his cooking. One time, he bought new clothes for her. One time, he brought over beautiful flowers. Once, he came over to kill time and taught her how to play with coins. A game of fiddling with coins, turning them round and round on one’s fingertips. He handed her a coin, and when she turned it over the tip of her finger, she learned that it was surprisingly difficult.

Practicing playing with coins was a good way to waste time. The boy kept on coming every day after that as well. Eventually, years passed, and the two of them grew up. They had gotten incredibly good at coin tricks.

Even after they were grown, the young man never stopped coming to see her.

It was only natural that Emery developed feelings of love for him. She started waiting for him to come while fiddling with a coin on a daily basis. As if in answer to her feelings, he continued to come every day. Just talking together, their daily lives ripened and flourished.

How happy she would have been if such days could have continued on forever. She wished that blessed time could have gone on without end.

However—

There had been a turning point one day several years earlier, when the young man who had been Emery’s childhood friend stopped coming to see her. She

wondered what on earth had happened to him. She asked other people in her village, but there was no one who knew the answer.

For many months after that, she spent her days in terrible boredom. Day in and day out, she played with her coins, waiting for her beloved to knock at her door.

But he never returned.

Not only that, the others in her village disappeared, one after another.

And then, six months ago—

Emery, her body burdened by disease, became one of the people who had to leave the village.

“The survival of our species, the dark elves, is in danger,” she continued telling me matter-of-factly, not changing the tone of her voice one bit. “Miss Witch, do you know about dark elf hunting?”

Dark elf hunting.

It was an unfamiliar term.

“What’s that?” I cocked my head.

“The name of an evil occupation—” Emery fixed her eyes on the window, as if checking her surroundings. As before, raindrops struck the windowpane, nothing more. “As most people know, we dark elves possess characteristics that humans find convenient.”

Like perpetual youth and longevity, or the fact that every one of them, without exception, was handsome or beautiful.

At the very least, it was a fact that many humans were uncontrollably envious of the elves.

“But to us dark elves, those very characteristics are extremely unfortunate.”

“.....?”

“Dark elf hunters are people who make their livelihoods capturing dark elves like us.”

According to Emery, a number of her compatriots had been captured by dark

elf hunters and put in cages. The intention of the hunters surely doesn't bear repeating—they had any number of uses for a population of beautiful men and women who kept their youthful forms for all eternity.

Furthermore, in many places, the dark elves were reviled. No matter how cruelly the humans treated them, they never felt guilty.

It seemed quite natural that slave traders would discover the commercial value of Emery and other dark elves.

"The activity of elf hunting has picked up over the past several years. We dark elves have lost people, one after another. As far as I know, there are only a few of us left alive who haven't been captured yet."

"....."

"That's why we ended up venturing out into the world from our villages, in order to save the dark elf race."

She told me—

She and the other dark elves had been wandering from country to country, searching for spouses. The male dark elves were making passes at the women in the places they visited, while the female dark elves were speaking to the men. In that way, she said, they were taking action to save the dark elf species.

"...And you can't do that with your fellow dark elves?"

Couldn't a dark elf have romantic relations with another dark elf?

But Emery slowly shook her head.

"We must introduce new blood in order to grow the dark elf species. Relations between two dark elves are forbidden."

"....."

"That's why I ended up leaving my village six months ago."

And during those six months, she told me, she had wandered through all sorts of places.

"You, as a human, will probably laugh at this, but..." She smiled weakly. "We dark elves hold the idea that as long as we are able to increase our ranks, that is

enough. So we don't have the custom of marriage."

"....."

"So I've been to all sorts of places *and had all sorts of people as partners*. Of course, that goes for this city as well—," she added, looking out the window. "This very morning, I was planning to partner with someone who spoke to me by the side of the road."

But that evening, I had come upon Emery lying out in the rain.

"The person who came up to speak to me this morning was one of the dark elf hunters. Once he recognized that I was a dark elf, he brandished a knife right then and there and threatened me. He said I was a goner if I didn't get in his cage."

"And then what happened?"

"I escaped. I threw something at him, ducked into the crowd, and kept on running."

Then apparently, she had realized something while she was running away. It had occurred to her that she hadn't had a proper meal for the past several days. And that she hadn't had anything to drink either.

Before long, she had run out of energy and collapsed on the road, where I had discovered her.

That was the whole story, apparently.

"...You should at least eat properly."

All I could do was offer this mild rebuke.

"I'm penniless. There was nothing I could do."

She smiled.

As I stared at her, my mind recalled the image of her praying at the fountain.

The woman who had just told me she was broke had been throwing a gold coin into the fountain almost every day and making a wish.

What on earth has she been wishing for?



The following day—

The two of us had fallen asleep without realizing it at the end of her long story, and then we woke up together once the sun came up. By then, Emery's clothes were already dry, so I recovered my blouse.

It was the last day of my stay, so I collected my things and left the inn with her.

"I came to this city with another elf, just so you know."

According to Emery, she had made arrangements to depart the city together with her countryman sometime that day.

Their rendezvous spot was the usual one, just beside the inn.

Right in front of the fountain.

Apparently, her counterpart had already arrived at the meeting spot. A male dark elf—a dark elf with a familiar face—was standing there.

"...Is that your companion?"

Specifically, I had the feeling I had seen him near the fountain on the first day of my stay in the city.

"He is, yes. He's a really good person." Emery nodded matter-of-factly.

Once he noticed us, the male dark elf walked over, waving in our direction.

"You're late, Emery... Who's that?"

"The woman to whom I owe my life."

She gave the male elf a simple account of what had happened the day before. She told him about encountering the dark elf hunter and about how I happened to pick her up.

It seemed like perhaps she'd had a similar experience several times before. The man said, "Is that so...? Well then, it seems like we ought to hide ourselves in the forest for a little while."

As he made that suggestion, he stared at the brooch on my chest and then performed an exaggerated bow. "It sounds like you aided my compatriot—thank you, Lady Witch."

I couldn't manage to shake my sense of discomfort at his demeanor.

"...You seem different from when we met several days ago."

At the very least, I was sure this dark elf whose name I didn't even know had been a little more of a cad when I'd first met him.

He was like a completely different person now.

He looked up and cocked his head. And then—

"Oh? Have we met somewhere before?"

He said it like it was the first time he had ever seen me.

".....?"

He didn't seem to remember me at all.

My goodness, could his failed proposal already have faded into a distant memory?

As for me—

"You don't remember meeting me several days ago by the canal?" I ventured.

But under his hood, the man just put on an ambiguous smile.

He must not remember. He must have forgotten.

That was what I thought. But apparently, he and I were really, genuinely meeting here for the first time.

"That was probably a different dark elf, not me," he casually stated. "Once we dark elves finish growing, everyone turns out looking the same on the outside."

He told me—

When members of the dark elf race become adults, all of them have more or less the same facial features. The only things that remain slightly different are their voices and their heights. If you lined up a bunch of elves of the same sex, even their fellow elves often couldn't tell them apart at all.

In other words, the male dark elf before my eyes was sporting a face that was extremely average for members of his species, or so he informed me.

As a test, I handed him the ring with the inscription, which the male dark elf

whom I had encountered a few days earlier at the canal had forced on me, but he didn't remember it at all. In fact— "You think one of us would give a gift like this...? Tasteless..."

—from the way he held the ring between his fingers and even spoke of it with such scorn, I knew it was certainly no lie that he was a different person.

"He had such poor taste for one of our own. But that ring looks like it would fetch a high price if you sold it..." Emery assessed from the side as she stared at the ring.

"....."

She seems to want it.

"Go ahead and take it if you like. I'll give it to you."

"Wow! You're sure it's all right?"

"Even if I kept it, I wouldn't have any use for the thing, so really, it's fine. Besides, if we ever meet outside this city, it would be helpful for you to have some distinguishing feature so I can tell whether or not it's you, Emery."

I figured that if the race of dark elves was composed of people who all had the same face, it might be nice if she had one or two traits to differentiate herself from others.

Well, such reasoning was simply an expedience, though.

To tell the truth, I just thought I could help her with money for traveling, after she had spent all her money obsessively making wishes in a fountain until she was flat broke.

Though of course, I could never say as much. It would embarrass her, you see.

"By the way, Emery, you've been offering up prayers at this fountain every day, but—"

At any rate, she was about to leave the city, so I was sure she wouldn't be making any more prayers, but— "Just what have you been wishing for this whole time?"

—I'd been a little curious.

I'd been curious about it ever since I first spotted her there. What on earth had she been wishing for, sacrificing all she had like the main character in some fictional story?

"Isn't it obvious?"

She turned toward the fountain and briefly gazed at the spray of water, which was scattering through the air like flower petals.

Then she faced me again.

She'd only made a single wish.

"I wished that somehow I would live on to tomorrow."

She said it with a smile.

To this woman, who, for the preservation of her species, was traveling from country to country so that she might leave behind offspring, hounded by the fear of the dark elf hunters, surely survival was more important than money, more important than anything else. Even if the story about the fountain was total fiction, she was compelled to keep wishing.

That very earnest woman then said, "Treasure the life you're granted." Then she smiled and left the city. Only a month after that, she was killed by dark elf hunters.



At the campsite of the dark elf hunters—

The moment I answered that I had encountered dark elves before, the man's attitude suddenly changed.

When and where did I see them? What kind of dark elves were they? Did I have a close relationship with them?

I was escorted through to the center of their camp, told to sit in a chair of simple construction, and asked detailed questions about the circumstances of my meeting the elves.

I answered as I was asked, and the hunter flinched a little bit. I'd always been told that dark elf hunters were dreadful, vicious people, so I was a little confused.

“...Are you feeling all right? You’re not in poor health now? Does anything feel wrong?” The man looked me over as if he was dealing with a sick person. “Since you encountered them a month ago, and you’ve been able to continue your travels, you’re probably fine, but—from now on, I believe it would be best for you to avoid any contact with dark elves, as best you’re able.”

He told me that if I ever spotted a dark elf, I should flee as far away as I could.

“...Why is that?”

You’re making it sound like dark elves are dangerous creatures.

“Because if they remember your face, there’s a chance you may be a target.”

You’re making it sound like the dark elves are a bad bunch.

What exactly is that about?

“—Allow me to tell you about the true nature of the dark elf species. Come this way.”

I remained skeptical as the dark elf hunter handed me a piece of cloth to cover the lower half of my face, then showed me around the campsite.

“The species known as the dark elves is seriously misunderstood.”

According to my guide—

Dark elves are known to be people with silver hair, golden eyes, and elongated ears, who are all attractive and handsome regardless of gender, who have perpetual youth and longevity, or something close to it, and who, in most cases, live in the forest.

In many ways, he said, this description was inconsistent with their actual characteristics.

“First of all, they have a life span of only a single year,” said the dark elf hunter. “As far as we know, we have no record of any of them living longer than that. *Once they become dark elves*, they are destined to die within a year. The legend about them living forever probably comes from the fact that all dark elves more or less look exactly the same.”

“Once we dark elves finish growing, everyone turns out looking the same on

the outside.”

If I wasn't mistaken, the male dark elf whom I had previously met had told me that.

“.....”

And there were quite a number of dark elves there before my eyes, male and female, bound together with ropes. There was nothing behind their eyes. They looked at me with sweet, flirtatious expressions, whispering with no regard for the situation they were in.

“What a lovely woman.”

“She's so cute.”

“Come see me tonight, if you like.”

“Won't you marry me?”

“It's an honor to have met you.”

“I love you.”

With their similar faces, they whispered together.

It sent a chill up my spine.

I winced, and the dark elf hunter said, “Miss Witch, it's likely that the dark elves you met weren't showing serious symptoms just yet. The ones here are in the terminal stages. They only have a month left to live.”

“You're talking as if they're ill.”

“That is what I'm saying.” Bluntly, the man continued, “Tiny creatures, invisible to the naked eye. An infectious disease. That's the true form of the dark elves.”

“.....”

He told me—

The dark elf hunters had been researching the ecology of the organisms known as dark elves for quite some time. According to their research, whenever someone was infected by the dark elf *disease*, the changes that happened to

their body could be divided into two main stages.

The first thing that happened was recovery from any disorder. Even if the person was disabled or had a chronic disease, even if they didn't have long left to live, any illnesses would be cured, as if by magic, in the days after they contracted dark-elfism.

The next thing that happened was the transformation.

Over the course of several weeks, their body would gradually change into that of a dark elf, just like the ones I saw before me. Along with the physical changes, their personality would transform as well. Their original personality would break down, and they would cast aside any of their human traits and become convinced they were a dark elf. Even their original memories would be overwritten.

All the dark elves, with their identical faces, every last one of them, was living for one purpose only: to seduce people for the sake of the perpetuation of their species.

And then, after living as dark elves for about one year, they came to the end of their lives. The closer they got to the end, the more the dark elves' personalities broke down, until finally they couldn't even speak in words and degenerated into a doll-like state where it was unclear whether they were living or dead.

And then, the man told me, at the very end, their bodies dissolved into a thick, dark liquid, and they disappeared.

"This dark liquid is especially troublesome, you see, for if you touch it, there's a high probability that you will be infected with dark-elfism. That's why we take care of them before they become terminal."

In short, the hunters killed them before they could spread the pathogen to others around them.

"I see."

I now had a rough understanding of the ecology of the organism known as the dark elf. But— "How does one contract dark-elfism?"

The elf hunter nodded and answered, “We’re not entirely sure, but you can consider there to be a high likelihood of infection whenever someone comes in contact with the mucous membranes of a dark elf.”

“.....”

“It sounds like you didn’t touch any of their mucosa, Miss Witch, so you’re probably fine—but please don’t let your guard down. It’s possible that the dark elves may appear before you again. People who encounter dark elves once become easier for them to target after that. Dark elves are colonies of tiny, invisible organisms that transmit themselves via other people’s bodies and increase their population by proliferation. That is to say, a specimen sharing the same set of memories can continue to increase in near inexhaustible supply.”

In other words, if any of the dark elves who had met me came in contact with someone’s mucous membranes after our meeting, the number of dark elves that possessed memories of me would also increase, apparently.

Which was why the dark elf hunters covered and hid their whole bodies, so that no individual could be remembered.

“...Is that so?”

Then the dark elf hunter told me, “If you encounter any dark elves in the future, I think it would be best for you to immediately leave.”

To sum it all up, the dark elves in the camp had all originally been humans, and as a consequence of having relations with dark elves, they had become members of that species.

“In order to make the terror of the dark elves known throughout the world, we deliberately cage them while they’re still alive and travel with them from place to place. It’s an awareness campaign. We tell everyone who comes near the cages about the reality of the dark elves so that no one else will fall victim to them.”

That must have been why he had explained the situation to me.

However—

“This must be a difficult job.”

“Yes, in its own way.”

Several other dark elf hunters passed in front of us as he was answering me. In teams of two, they carried stretchers bearing elves that had lost the ability to move. They proceeded straight toward the direction of the smoke.

“But it’s unavoidable. This job is a necessary one to protect humanity from a great danger that threatens us, so—even though it’s a job where we have to kill things that were once people, after traveling like this for some time, I believe we take these actions for the sake of humanity.”

While he was talking—

An arm fell limply from one of the stretchers that was passing by. The hand was wearing a brand-new ring. It also seemed to be holding on to something.

It fell with a clatter to the ground.

The man picked it up and said, “Besides, the job pays quite well,” while nimbly fiddling with the coin at the tips of his fingers.

“Especially as someone who needs to save up money no matter what,” he added.



It must have been several months after all that happened.

I was walking through a festival in the middle of a certain city.

Walking down the street, there were people, people, and more people, all holding books. All down the street and into the town square, there were many temporary tents set up side by side. Fluttering everywhere were signs proclaiming the wonderful plot twist of some popular book, or that a certain book had astonished its readers, or that everyone who read a particular book had been deeply moved, or imploring customers to purchase a given book because it was funny.

It was a festival held by book lovers for book lovers.

And it was almost exactly like the book fair held in my hometown.

I recalled my younger days, walking around being pulled by the hand by my mother.

“.....”

And I remembered *them*, too.

Then a group of people came down the road. On the other side of them, I could see a lone woman leaning against the wall of a house, enthusiastically reading a book.

The woman, wearing her hood pulled low over her face, looked in my direction, as if she had been waiting for my gaze to land on her.

She peered at me with gold eyes between strands of silver hair.

Then she motioned for me to be silent.

Just like what had happened when I was younger, she gestured with her finger for me to keep quiet.

“.....”

The moment I was about to say something—

—before I realized it, the dark elf had disappeared.

As if she had never existed in the first place, like a momentary vision or something from a dream.

But I was certain there had been a dark elf there.



CHAPTER 3

A Tale of Three Cities: The Reason for the Price

One day, my sister and I arrived in City A (provisional name), a place full of time-worn scenery with historical elegance.

Old stone buildings lined the streets. They stood quietly along both sides of the road, as if watching over me and my older sister, travelers and outsiders that we were.

“This town is quite charming, isn’t it?”

One traveler with light jade-green eyes, short white hair, and a black headband.

Her name was Amnesia. My older sister.

I expected my sister to always be on guard, but she must have been feeling a little relaxed once we made it to the city. She was weaving aimlessly down the street, taken in by the scenery.

“It’s dangerous not to watch where you’re going.”

A hand tugged at my sister’s sleeve.

A younger traveler with light jade-green eyes, long white hair, and a black ribbon.

Her name was Avelia. That’s me.

After we’d passed through the gate into the city, there had hardly been any foot traffic until we’d reached the main avenue we were walking along now. The town had a very quiet, pleasant atmosphere.

But that wasn’t to say that there was no one on the roads or that this was a deserted city.

We would be in trouble if we bumped shoulders with any of the residents.

“Big sister, did you know? The average earnings in this city are much higher than they are anywhere else, or so I hear.”

“Oh? Really?”

My big sister narrowed her eyes. She began glancing around, sizing up the few people we could see on the street.

Everyone was wearing seasonal clothing, like dresses, blouses, and shirts, and all of it was exceptionally plain.

In short, the townsfolk were all very plain.

“...Are there really a lot of rich people here?”

That was why my sister was squinting so hard.

But I nodded, full of confidence.

There had been all sorts of information written in the city’s promotional pamphlet about the tourist attractions and the history of the place and even, leaving aside whether this part was true or false, about the one characteristic feature of the city: that its inhabitants had no character.

A VERY HOMEY PLACE! the pamphlet had said. OUR PEOPLE ARE VERY FRIENDLY TO TRAVELERS. ASK THEM ANYTHING YOU WANT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CITY. OUR RESIDENTS WILL ANSWER ANY QUESTION! the pamphlet had insisted.

Most of what the pamphlet had to say seemed totally suspect.

The whole pamphlet was written in that sort of language.

I read it out loud as I walked along with my sister.

“‘The truly wealthy do not show off the fact that they have money. The people of this city shun flashy things, and most of them desire a simple, quiet lifestyle,’ apparently.”

“Huh...”

“‘This city is known as a place where individuals with lots of money can live peaceful lives, and many have moved here from elsewhere,’ it says.”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s pretty much what’s written in the pamphlet.” I was staring intently at the pamphlet as we walked along.

“I see.”

My big sister nodded and yanked sharply on my sleeve.

“It’s dangerous not to watch where you’re going.”



Everything about the town was utterly ordinary, and yet it made me feel vaguely uneasy.

The street stalls that would have been seen lining the main avenue in most cities did not exist here. Instead, vegetables and fruits were arranged for sale in the greengrocer’s, and bread was the same way. When it came to skewered meat and the like, it wasn’t even being sold in the first place. Apparently, it was prohibited to sell because of the strong scent. That was also written in the pamphlet.

The people seemed to be fussy to a fault about the scenery of their city. There were very few signs, shop curtains, or other such things.

Frankly, there were so few markings that it was impossible to discern whether a building was a shop or a private home without getting quite close.

“Which is this one...?”

“Who knows...?”

Actually, it wasn’t always clear even after getting close.

We stood in front of a store for a moment, both our heads cocked in confusion.

There were many stores standing side by side in this city.

The looks of the stores were highly stylized, sometimes to the point that mere travelers like us, as first-time customers, couldn’t really tell what was being sold inside.

After we stood there for a while tilting our heads and asking, “Which could it be?” my sister suggested, “Well, we’ll know if we go in, won’t we?” and ultimately we stepped inside a shop, encouraged by the idea.

However—

“What is this shop selling...?”

“Who knows...?”

We still couldn't really tell, even after going in.

The shop was modest yet stylish. The scent of aromatherapy oils wafted through the air, and goods were displayed individually on a series of beautifully aligned shelves.

And for some reason, there was a grand piano sitting in the middle of the shop.

“Heh-heh-heh... Welcome. Go ahead and look around as you please. But you mustn't sample, okay...?”

And the perfectly attired proprietor was playing that piano, live.

When we entered the shop, she turned toward us with a flutter of hair and said, “My little darlings get even tastier when I let them listen to good music...”

We hadn't asked, but for some reason she explained anyway.

On the beautifully aligned shelves in the overly stylish shop sat apples, bananas, cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce, and so on. Multicolored fruits and vegetables of all kinds were on display.

To put it plainly, it was a grocery store.

“They're expensive...”

“So expensive...”

We stood before the shelves for a moment, at a loss for words.

The ridiculous prices were written beneath each item.

Most of the vegetables cost about five times the market rate. But the strange thing was that there were plenty of people buying them, and the store was packed with housewives listening to the tones of the grand piano as they did their shopping.

It seemed that this city was indeed populated by the wealthy.

However, these were absolutely not products that foreigners and travelers

such as us could lay our hands on.

So we just left.

“What was with those ridiculous prices?”

“Who knows...? Maybe it includes a performance fee?”

I was already convinced that this city existed within an eccentric, peculiar cultural system.

All the stores we went into after that, every single one of them, had some strange concept. They were so bizarre that in every store we entered, we spun right back around.

As we wandered around town laughing uneasily, I thought about how it would have been nice if they had at least written something in the pamphlet about how strange this city was.

We had many unusual exchanges in the strange shops we visited.

“Everything in our shop is the highest-quality vintage product,” extolled a specialty cheesemonger as he showed us around his shop.

“What on earth is vintage cheese?” my older sister asked.

“Cheese that has gone over to the other side of fermentation,” came the answer, with a proud look.

Honestly, I didn’t understand what that meant.

“So in other words, it’s just rotten...?”

“Stop it, Avelia.”

“I mean, what is that shopkeeper looking so proud about?”

“Avelia...”

In the end, we retreated from the cheese store without buying anything.

After that, we popped over to a butcher shop.

“Take a look at this. It’s very beautiful, isn’t it...? Sparkling like a gemstone...”

The meat, glistening bewitchingly under the light of a lamp in the shop, was apparently the rarest meat from the highest grade of cattle that were raised

ever so carefully.

It looked less like meat and more like a singular work of art.

“What incredible meat...!”

My sister’s eyes lit up as she beheld such meat. She gazed longingly at it, just like a young maiden in love.

“By the way, how much does this cost?”

The butcher nodded at me and answered her after a long silence.

“*Sigh...* It’s priced like a gemstone, too.”

It goes without saying that we moved on from that store immediately. No matter how wonderful the meat looked, the price was not wonderful at all.

“I’m always ready to eat meat, but...,” my big sister said with a sigh, “that price would dampen any appetite.”

The next place we visited was a cosmetics store standing inconspicuously along the road.

“Come take a look! We’ve developed a totally new type of cosmetic treatment!”

Inside the dazzling store—

The woman running the store announced her development to customers as she poured magical energy into a cauldron. There was a *poof* of smoke, and then a tiny creature crawled out of the cauldron. It was about as tall as my index finger. It had on an adorable little hat, and as it flapped its butterfly-like wings, the creature bowed once to all the customers in the store.

It was a fairy.

Then the fairy flew around the store, giving each of the customers a kiss on the cheek.

“The spell I’ve devised cleanses toxins from the body. How is it? Doesn’t your skin feel rejuvenated?”

As to whether or not the effect was real, that was obvious from looking at the reactions of the customers gazing delightedly into the shop mirrors.

The fairy flew over to me and my big sister and kissed us both. I could tell when I looked at it up close that the fairy the cosmetics peddler had created was not actually a proper living creature but just a type of magical illusion made to look like a fairy.

In other words, the fairy's kiss was simply theatrical, and the magic spell that was actually removing the toxins was just floating through the air around us.

I don't know if it was because it was applied by such an elaborate theatrical process, but the price of that cosmetic treatment was high enough to make my brow wrinkle.



Sure enough, my sister and I made an about-face.

I'd wondered the same thing at the grocery store we had visited first.

"Why on earth is every shop putting on such complicated presentations? I imagine their customers would be happier if they reduced the price by the same amount they have to increase it in order to pay for all that unnecessary staging."

Next, we stopped off at an inn, and I candidly asked the proprietor there about it.

Supposing this inn had been, like most of the other shops in this city, the type of place to deal in contrived theatrics, I would never have said such a thing, but as you can probably deduce from the fact that I gave my honest opinion so plainly and decisively, it was an establishment that had no use for pointless theatrics.

As far as I could see, the interior was quite simple, and the rates were reasonable.

Though it was a little bit more expensive than your average inn in another city, there was no doubt that it was cheaper than most places in this city. You could say it was an inn that was kind on the wallet.

Both the price and the chuckling proprietor on the other side of the counter were very inviting.

"Well, but there's nothing for it. The people of this city really go crazy for expensive things, you know."

The proprietor shrugged.

"You do know that the people of this city are all rich, don't you?" he asked.

So I nodded.

And my sister answered him as she fished the pamphlet out of my pocket, "We read this."

The innkeeper said, "The thing about the people living in this city, you see, is that since they have a lot of money, they want more expensive things than

ordinary people do.”

It was assumed that items that cost more than other goods had something special about them. The very fact that something had an exceptional price seemed to stoke the desire to purchase it in these people, who were all part of an exceptional social class.

“So in order to make special, expensive things, the greengrocer, for example, puts a lot of time and effort into raising fruits and vegetables, and the butcher deals in rare cuts of expensive meat. The cosmetics peddler uses rare ingredients and puts on a special performance. After all, their wares seem more special that way, right?”

“And the consumers are all attracted by this...?”

The innkeeper nodded at me.

“They want expensive things just because they’re expensive.”

He told us that recently, qualities like taking a lot of time to make or being made with special materials were no longer enough to make something sell.

“For instance, that cosmetic treatment that imitates a fairy is a good example. All the cosmetics that shop sells are certainly high-quality, but they weren’t selling at all until the folks there added the staging with the fairy.”

No matter how good the substance of a product was, that didn’t matter if its appearance was so plain that it didn’t stick in anyone’s memory—explained the innkeeper.

“It’s all make-believe, and it’s all absolutely essential. People are always looking for a way to stand out.”

That must have been why, at the cosmetics shop, they had switched to the presentation with the illusory fairy. The flashy look of it made the high price very easy to understand.

By the way, in a situation like this, if we try to reframe it, looking at it from the perspective of the people trying to trick customers into buying cheap goods—

“So then, no matter how poorly made something is, as long as it looks good on the outside, someone will be fooled into buying it, right?”

You could also look at it that way, right?

“And such goods do sell very well.” The innkeeper sighed. “Recently, it seems like such scams have become all too common,” he added.

This city was a place where the average income was very high.

It was ironic that the people here found particular value in products with extravagant appearances, considering that they hated being flashy and wanted to live simple, quiet lives.

“But, and I may be bringing this up too late, is it okay for you to be talking so openly about the internal affairs of this city with travelers?” my big sister asked as she paid the fee for one night’s stay for the two of us.

The innkeeper accepted the money with a practiced gesture and gently placed the room key in my sister’s hand. “Yes, it’s no problem at all.” He smiled.

Then he told us this:

“Cheap things are cheap for a reason, too.”



CHAPTER 4

The Exorcist and the Demon

“—Oh...how can this be?!”

“—How could something like this happen...?!”

“—I’m begging you...! Please...please save her...!”

The adults of the village were clinging to a single man.

Dressed in stiff, black garments, the man, whose name was Henrik, stood there resolutely. Physically, he was somewhat slim, and in age, he was in his mid-twenties.

The young exorcist smiled gently at the villagers.

“Leave it to me,” he told them. *“Without fail...I will save her.”*

He was the only one who could save the girl.

“Ah...ohhh...”

The girl, tied to a chair, looked up at Henrik with hollow eyes, empty of all light. She wasn’t even speaking proper words; the sounds that spilled from her mouth from time to time were just eerie, uncanny groans.

There was none of the girl’s consciousness there.

She was possessed by a demon.

“Unh...ohhh...”

The girl glared at Henrik.

Perhaps the demon recognized that the young man standing before it was an exorcist who had come to the village in order to expel it. There was an intimidating look in the girl’s eyes, which were filled with rage and hatred.

“.....”

A chill ran up the young man’s spine.

Every year, when the spring came, the demons came out in this village.

It had all started about four years earlier.

One spring day, much like the present day, Henrik's predecessor, a senior exorcist, visited the village for the first time. He had received word that one of the village's young girls was possessed by a demon. And then every year after that, at around the same time of year, several of the village's young girls and boys would be possessed by demons. The senior exorcist had gone there every year to drive them out.

This year, it was Henrik's turn to take on that role.

"....."

He had received one bit of advice from the senior exorcist regarding the demons that appeared every year.

"The demons of this village are different from other demons. Be careful."

Henrik remembered very well how the senior exorcist had been wounded all over his body when he came back from the village each year.

So he looked down at the girl in front of him—

"Wh-what wicked eyes you have...!"

—and a shiver ran up his spine.

As the girl glared at the young man, her eyes overflowed with more malice than he had ever felt from any of the demons he had faced off against before. It was truly an aura of danger. It was almost as if, before she had even been possessed by the demon, she had been nurturing something infernal in the bottom of her heart.

He couldn't afford to lose focus even for a moment.

"What is this girl's name?" Henrik asked the villagers.

The lamenting villagers around him looked at each other in silence, then gazed at the girl tied to the chair with looks of pity.

She had beautiful ash-gray hair. And lapis-blue eyes. She was still groaning and moaning in the chair, looking up at the man. Clad in a dress with a flared skirt, if she had only shut her mouth, she would have looked like a refined

young woman. Or maybe a doll.

However, she was possessed by a demon, and her demeanor was bedraggled. Both her pretty face and her adorable springtime outfit were utterly ruined.

“Ahh...uhhh!”

By the way, just who do you think that poor, pitiful girl could be?

One of the villagers answered Henrik.

“She’s called Elaina.”

“Elaina, is it? I see.”

So then, just who could this Elaina character be?

I don’t have to tell you, do I?

That’s right, it’s me.



The place I visited that day was a small village in the mountains.

Apparently, bandits hardly ever appeared in the area, so the village had a peaceful atmosphere.

There was no fence separating the village from the outside world. As I walked down the street overgrown with trees, a collection of several wooden houses standing amid the beautiful green foliage spread out before me. When I directed my gaze upward, I could see a row of majestic mountains covered in a thin dusting of snow.

I inhaled, taking in the pleasant spring air.

Spread out beneath the cloudless sky, this was a wonderful place.

“What lovely scenery...”

According to the rumors, this place was a normal village but also a place that many tourists visited every year, especially during this season of early spring, which I’d been told was the most popular time to come.

And considering how beautiful the scenery was, I had no choice but to agree.

I alighted from my broom when I reached the entrance to the village and

began walking, enchanted by the beautiful sight of abundant nature all around me.

The village seemed to be mostly composed of small single-story houses. The buildings lining the road, which was nothing more than a roughly paved path where the weeds had been pulled, were all modest private homes.

Since they were just humble homes, it should have been easy enough to get a glimpse of the lives of the inhabitants if I looked in the windows as I walked past, but— “.....?”

—but it was the strangest thing.

There weren't any people in any of the houses lining the street.

In fact, there's no one on the road either. I don't think it's possible that no one lives here, but—could they have gone out somewhere? The whole village?

I walked on, looking up and down the road and gazing into windows.

If someone else had seen me, I'm sure I would have looked fairly suspicious, but since there was no one there to see me in the first place, I figured I could be forgiven a little bit of indiscretion.

The first thing I had intended to do after arriving at the village was to find an inn, but since there was no one around I could ask about lodgings, I was at a loss.

I suppose it must have been several minutes later when—

“Oh!”

I stopped in my tracks.

I was standing in front of an old house. Next to the house was a tree covered in red fruits, as if it was nestled up against it.

When I glanced inside through a window, I saw some adults discussing something with serious looks on their faces.

Apparently, the villagers are all gathered here.

“.....”

And then, several seconds after I began my rude peeping—

—a troubled-looking man with hunched shoulders standing across from the window happened to turn his head toward me.

“.....”

In short, my peeping was promptly discovered.

The moment he made eye contact with me, the man hurriedly disappeared from the window.

Or so I thought, but he immediately reappeared at the back door.

“Are you by any chance a traveler?”

His breath came out heavy along with his words.

“Ah, I, uh... I am, but...”

I was planning to continue by asking, *“Excuse me, but do you know where I can find an inn?”* My plan was to take the conversation in a direction that didn’t really touch on the reason why the villagers were all gathered in one house.

But the man beat me to the punch.

“Great, then come in here for a minute! Come on, hurry!”

And he was pushy about it, too.

It was easy to see that the mood in the place was not normal.

It was obvious that something unexpected had taken place in that house, and they must have been in a situation where they wanted any kind of help they could get, even if it came from a stranger.

“Sigh...”

Even though I didn’t really know what the circumstances were, I entered the house under the man’s invitation, with nothing more than speculations swirling around in my head.

Without knowing about the hellish spectacle taking place beyond that door.



Inside the house, a large number of adults were gathered around a single young girl.

According to the villagers, she was the daughter of the household, a girl who had always been cheerful, energetic, and very kind.

“Uuunhhh...aaahhh...!”

Now she was tied to a chair, groaning and swinging her long blond hair around—but apparently she was usually a very good kid.

Her parents were holding each other’s hands, talking about the girl in voices filled with despair.

“She’s such a good girl, she always cleans her plate...”

“Uahhh...” Their daughter let bits of fruit offered by the villagers fall out of her mouth.

“She’s so kind to the elderly people of the village...”

“*Peh!*” Their daughter spit at the elders standing right behind her parents.

“But today, she’s been acting a little strangely, ever since this morning—”

“Uaaagh—!” Their daughter scowled at everyone who approached her.

“I see, I see.”

This is very aggressive for a rebellious phase.

I nodded noncommittally. It seemed like the people of the village had heard all the uproar and had gathered here and worked themselves into a panic.

But no matter how many people had gathered, they hadn’t been able to quiet the girl, who had started lashing out as if her whole personality had suddenly changed. Ultimately, the only thing they could think of doing was to tie her to a chair.

And then a traveling witch had looked in from outside the window, so they had invited her in.

“Can’t you do anything?” the head of the household pleaded with me.

“I’m not sure how to answer that...”

I looked down at the girl. She was swinging her head back and forth, groaning and moaning, and when our eyes met, she spit at me, aiming for my face.

“Whoop!”

I avoided it nimbly.

“No doubt about it. This is a demon’s doing...,” said an old man with a very village-headman-like look to him and a know-it-all expression on his face. It was a truly serious expression. Though he was covered in spit. It must have hit him because I dodged it. My bad.

“...Has something like this happened before?”

If you’re certain enough to assert that it’s a demon’s doing, there must be some basis for that belief.

“Mm. Sure has.” The headman wiped the spit off his forehead. “In our village, every year around this time, demons possess the bodies of certain villagers. Last year and the year before that, and even before that, the villagers possessed by demons have acted quite violently.”

“Hmm.”

“And because of that, in our village, every year when people start getting possessed by demons, we know that spring has come...”

“Oh really...?”

I could only guess that the people of the village would prefer not to mark the coming of spring with such an event.

“How could such a thing happen...?!” the head of the household lamented.

Even so, his grief alone was not enough to make the demon that had possessed his daughter disappear. She was still swinging her head around, groaning and moaning, her vacant eyes wandering around the room.

By the way, whenever someone approached her or made eye contact with her, it seemed she immediately spit at them. She had spit at me earlier.

“.....”

Then our eyes met again.

“Peh!” she spit.

“Whoop!” I dodged.

“.....” The village headman wordlessly wiped away the spit. “Anyway, we’re really at a loss here...”

“Sounds that way...”

Something like this happening during tourist season definitely endangers the future of this village. I’m sure they don’t want people to stop coming to this village, which is surrounded by beautiful scenery, do they?

“Peh!”

“Whoop!”

And I’m sure they don’t want this to turn into a village where people calmly spit at sightseers, do they?

In which case—

“If you like, perhaps I could resolve this for you?”

As a traveler, and a witch, I made a proposal. “You’d like it if I returned her to normal, right?”

I told them I thought I could do it.

“Can you really...?! ”

They hadn’t asked me, but I made the proposal anyway.

The villagers made a stir, beginning with the head of the household.

Then the village headman asked me, wide-eyed, “That would be wonderful...! Is there anything I can do to help?”

Something you can do, huh?

Looking at the village headman’s forehead, I said, “For now, I recommend wiping away all that spit.”



There are many varieties of demon. They certainly are not a monolithic species. I’d encountered creatures that could be called demons before. And apparently, there is also a variety of demon that can possess human bodies.

And generally, we call people whose occupation is driving out troublesome

demons that have possessed bodies *exorcists*.

I'm not all that well versed in the profession of exorcism, but I've heard that when they face off against a demon that is possessing someone's body, they generally go through the following procedure: First, they stand in front of the victim, who has been tied to a chair, and shout, "Get out of this person's body!" The irritated demon uses the victim's body to shout back at the exorcist, and so begins the battle between the two. They enter a verbal sparring match. "Get out of there at once!" shouts the exorcist. "Shut up! I'll kill you!" spits the demon. Their relationship is like one between a landlord demanding an eviction and a resident barricading themselves inside.

Once the exorcist senses that the demon will not be driven out with words alone, they start to harass the demon. If the demon doesn't come out when asked to leave, the idea is to make it feel like the body is an uncomfortable place to be.

The exorcist uses every possible method to drive out the demon.

For example, splashing water in the person's face or slapping their cheeks with all their might. Or making the demon listen to them drone on and on about some boring topic. Also, as they execute such plainly awful tactics, the exorcist threatens, "If you don't get out of there, I'll continue this harassment forever," and most of the time, the demon comes out.

That was the explanation I had gotten regarding techniques for exorcizing a demon from the exorcists whom I had met previously.

Of course, I'd never seen an actual exorcism, so I didn't have a clue about how it really happened or what they did in other places.

Well now, after reviewing the job of the exorcist, let's take a look at how I did with the girl before me.

"Glug-glug-glug-glug!"

She drank water.

She drank it all down.

"Yes, yes, that's right! Keep on drinking! Drink more!"

I crammed a bottle into her mouth, and the girl kept gulping down the water. I had her lying with her head in my lap, and I praised her as I stroked her hair. “That’s a good girl.”

Looking at this spectacle, the village headman seemed truly perplexed.

“Lady Witch, what on earth...?”

“I’m letting her drink to her heart’s content.”

As you can plainly see.

“That doesn’t seem to be a method of exorcism we know...”

“Well, what did you do up until last year?”

“We kept on shouting endlessly at the demon, for as long as it took...”

Ah, the most typical method of exorcism, huh?

“Well, for this girl, I think this will be more effective than those ordinary methods of exorcism.”

“Uh...”

The headman drew back.

“*Glug-glug-glug-glug!*” The girl kept right on chugging as we talked.

Then, after she had kept on drinking until the large bottle was empty—
“*Hah...* What on earth did I...?!”

—she returned to her senses. Her eyes snapped open, and she had none of the dangerous aura that had surrounded her until a moment earlier.

She groaned quietly and looked around. She seemed bewildered by the astonished appearance of the villagers. And she didn’t spit or glare at anyone.

The village headman told her what had happened, and the girl’s eyes went wide.

“Huh...? A demon...? I was possessed by a demon...?”

She didn’t seem to have any memory of how she had been behaving until just a moment earlier. The girl was simply perplexed.

Well, at any rate—

“Looks like I solved it, huh?”

I threw out my chest with a sense of accomplishment for having finished the difficult task.

“Just what kind of magic did you use, Lady Witch?”

The headman could not hide his confusion. The solution had been far too simple, compared to the last year and the year before that, so his reaction was hardly surprising.

I leaned against the window and gazed outside as I said, “First of all, that girl was not possessed by a demon at all.”

In the garden stood a single tree covered in countless red fruits.

I had traveled through all sorts of lands on my journey and had seen a great many strange things that stuck in my memory. The tree in the garden was something I had laid eyes on before.

“In other lands, that tree is known as a demon tree, you know.”

According to the stories, in springtime, the red fruits growing on the tree seem incredibly sweet and delicious, but for some reason, growing among them is a single poisonous fruit.

In appearance, this poisonous fruit looks exactly like all the others. If you eat it, you suddenly lose the ability to speak in anything other than moans and groans, and you begin to try to spit at everyone who approaches you.

This demon tree tempts people with its sweet, delicious fruits, slipping the dangerous one in among them.

It’s just like a sweet trap laid by a demon.

“As soon as I saw that tree in your garden, I figured there was probably something like this going on.”

When someone eats the poisonous fruit, they can neutralize the poison by drinking a great deal of water. It dilutes the poison in the body.

But even if you simply leave the person alone, they return to normal once the poison is excreted from the body.

In short, if the exorcist faced off against the “demon” for a long time, and carried on and on with enough abuse, the victim would naturally recover their senses.

“So then, does that mean the demons don’t exist...?”

“Yep.”

Although the people who have a custom of calling that tree in your garden a demon tree would not agree with that statement.

“What the...?!”

The village headman fell to his knees.

“So that’s the true identity of your demons.”

I’d often heard stories of ghosts that turned out to be dried pampas grass or something, so I knew jumping to conclusions could make things complicated.

Here in this village as well, too many people jumped to conclusions, and as a result, they mistook simple poison from a fruit for demonic activity. They wasted a lot of effort fighting the demons, which likely postponed the victims’ recoveries.

“Unbelievable...”

The village headman, when confronted with the truth about the events of the past few years, simply hung his head.

“But we’ve already made arrangements for an exorcist...”

Oh, that guy?

You were awfully quick to call him, weren’t you?

“If he comes now, we’ll get charged a cancellation fee...”

You’re awfully hung up on that, aren’t you?

I frowned. This was a puzzling response. I felt like the mood of the villagers was beginning to gradually trend in a strange direction.

Noisily, the villagers looked down at the little girl I’d cured, and all spoke at once.

“Hey, what do we do now...?”

“This is bad...”

“So it wasn’t demons?”

“What do we do...?”

“But I’ve already done all sorts of preparations...”

“Me too...”

A kind of disquieting mood began to fill the air.

What’s going on? For some reason, the atmosphere here seems like I did something wrong, doesn’t it?

“Miss Witch, uh...” The girl’s father seemed to be having a very difficult time getting the words out as he asked me, “Um, there’s no chance that the demon is actually still inside my daughter, is there...?”

Huh...?

“No, I don’t think there is...”

“So the exorcist...”

“I don’t think you need one...”

Wow, this is a really weird atmosphere.

“What?! So I’m not getting exorcized by that handsome exorcist?! Come on!”

Even the daughter, who, as you know, had just recovered, jumped into the adults’ conversation. She seemed very put out.

I couldn’t make heads or tails of what was going on, but I was getting a very bad feeling about whatever this was.

“Lady Witch.” The village headman spoke to me in my bewilderment. He sounded really regretful. “To tell the truth, in our village, well, the exorcism of the demons by an exorcist has become something of an event...”

“What?”

He told me—

This village had always had scant options for entertainment, and the exorcisms had been rare occurrences. Recently, however, they had become annual events, and so as soon as the villagers had decided that the girl was possessed by a demon, they had sent for an exorcist from another land.

“And on top of that, the exorcist handling things this year is quite handsome, so all the girls in the village were looking forward to seeing him. To the point where, if you can believe it, the child who was possessed was considered quite lucky.”

“Uh...”

I don't know what to do...with this information...at this point...

“Moreover, in recent years, this exorcism event has become a major source of revenue for the village, so...”

“Meaning that the reason why you have a lot of tourists in the spring is—”

“—To see the exorcisms.”

“What?”

I was at a loss for words when confronted with these shocking facts.

It seemed that calling the exorcist had big implications for this little village. Understandably, their problem wasn't one they wanted a passing witch to solve.

“I never thought she'd actually be able to fix it...”

“What are we gonna do...? We've already done so much work preparing for the exorcism event...”

“This is terrible...”

Consequently, the adults of the village were sorely vexed.

They had thought they were showing the demon-possessed child to a simple tourist who had arrived slightly early. They had never considered that their demon problem might be solved for them.

“Lady Witch, can't you use your magic to do something?” the village headman asked me.

“Like what?”

“Can’t you cast a spell to make it seem like she’s possessed again or something?”

“Are you a demon yourself?”

“But we’ve got quite a lot of money riding on this event, so...”

Panic began to spread through the crowd. There was also the sense that I had somehow done something wrong.

Usually, when the mood starts to turn that way, especially when nobody is thinking straight, people start offering incomprehensible ideas, and— “I’ve got it! We can get the witch to pretend like she’s possessed by a demon!”

See, someone will say something like that without batting an eye.

The little girl who had been spitting at everyone who approached her until just a few minutes ago made this nonsensical proposal with a sparkle in her eye.

And usually, once one person throws out what they’re thinking, one after another, like an avalanche, everyone else will endorse the same nonsensical idea.

“Oh...!”

“I see, that’s one way to play it!”

“A witch possessed by a demon... It could work...”

“I think we can expect to attract quite a few customers with that.”

“Goodness, we certainly can!”

So yeah, that’s basically how it goes.

Goodness, what a pickle.

“Wait, um, but I don’t want to? I’m not doing that.”

That’s a firm refusal. I can do without all the hassle. Well, maybe it’s my fault it became a hassle, but a no is a no.

“But, Miss Witch, look!” the girl urged me. “The exorcist this time is this guy! He’s quite handsome, isn’t he?”

In her hand, she was holding a photograph.

“This doesn’t really have anything to do with who he is—,” I started to say.

I was still not particularly interested, but I lowered my gaze to the photo and immediately stopped talking.

I was looking at an exorcist who did indeed have quite a well-featured face.

Why, how splendid.

“See? Isn’t he handsome?”

“...He certainly is.”

I nodded in approval.

But it’s not like I was interested, though.

“If you’ll pretend to be possessed by a demon, Miss Witch, I’ll support you as your helper!”

“What kind of support, specifically?”

“Well, I’ll chat pleasantly with the exorcist.”

“Isn’t that just because you want to get close to the person doing the exorcism?”

“No, not at all.”

“Oh really?”

“It’s only because there are no hot guys in our village, so I’m starved for them, you see.”

“You’re devoted to your appetites, huh?”

“If things go well, I might even get his contact information.”

“You’re really devoted to your appetites, huh?”

“And then eventually, I plan to get him to introduce me to some hot guys in the capital!”

“So you’re using the exorcist as a stepping stone?”

“If I’m going to get a boyfriend, I want someone handsome, who’s tall, and

makes a lot of money, and has a good education, and who only has eyes for me...”

“That plan sounds awfully devilish, you know.”

Is it possible she actually is possessed by a demon?

“Oh, and, Lady Witch, I forgot to say this, but...,” the village headman cut in between me and the girl, “in our village, we have a legend that anyone who is possessed by a demon is actually quite lucky.”

“Actually quite lucky?”

Just what does that mean?

“Getting possessed by a demon is, in itself, an unfortunate event, but since we can rely on the exorcisms to fix it, if you look at the whole thing overall, it’s actually rather fortunate.”

“...Uh-huh.”

Come to think of it, when I work as a fortune-teller, if someone’s future looks too terrible, I present them with a lucky charm as a relief measure. This must be the same sort of thing.

“On top of that, in our village, the exorcisms performed by the exorcist are a major source of income, so we give the person who gets possessed by the demon quite a bit of money as a reward.”

“A reward, you say?”

I see, so you intend to tempt me with money?

That’s quite a dirty tactic you’re using, isn’t it? But I am also a traveler. I came to this village to sightsee. No matter how much money you’re offering, I’d like to refrain from meddling in matters that are none of my business.

“How much?”

Well, I suppose I’m willing to hear what you have to say, for my own edification.

Though I don’t plan to accept your offer, okay? I intend to turn you down, you hear? But you’ve got my curiosity up, and I want to see how much money you

could provision, if I forced the issue.

Then the village headman showed me a slip of paper.

“About this much—”

Oh-hoh, well now!

“I’ll do it.”

Before I knew it, I was exchanging a firm handshake with the village headman.

Even if the exorcist came, I doubted he would be able to completely drive away the filthy demon, or rather, the dirty money-grubber that was always lurking in the depths of my heart.

“So then, when is this exorcist supposed to arrive?” I asked.

The villagers looked at each other, and someone in the crowd answered that he usually showed up the following evening.

Which I suppose means there’s a delay of about a day and a half?

“Well then, please let me act at my own discretion until midday tomorrow. There are some preparations I need to take care of before I can pretend to get exorcized by an exorcist.”

“Mm-hmm.” The village headman nodded. “In that case, is there anything we can do?”

Something you can do, huh?

“Let me see... Well, could you introduce me to a tasty restaurant and a good inn in this village?”

“Is that necessary for the exorcism?”

No, no.

“I simply want to enjoy everything your village has to offer, that’s all.”

I originally came to this village as a tourist.

So surely there’s nothing wrong with fully enjoying my time here.



And so, the next day...

“—Oh...how can this be?!”

“—How could something like this happen...?!”

“—I’m begging you...! Please...please save her...!”

The villagers gave an enthusiastic performance. They clung to the young exorcist, bemoaning that there was no hope for me. I was there, too, tied to a chair.

The young man, who had black hair and was dressed in stiff black garments, was named Henrik. Physically, he was fairly slim, and he was about in his mid-twenties.

He had been brought to me immediately after arriving at the village, but he didn’t seem agitated at all. With an extremely calm demeanor, he smiled at the villagers.

“Leave it to me,” he told them. *“Without fail...I will save her.”*

He alone was capable of saving the pitiful girl (and outright liar) before him.

“Ah...ohhh...”

Of course, wearing the robes of a witch would have made the exorcist suspicious, so I was in my street clothes. A group of girls from the village had tied me to a chair. I was completely restrained, and all I could say was “ah” or “oh.”

Well, for a witch, acting like I’d been possessed by a demon was a piece of cake.

“Unh...ohhh...”

I knew that the people who ate the red fruit from the garden started to spit at everyone who approached them, so the demons that appeared in previous years must have spit at the exorcist a great deal. But I didn’t want to perform such a vulgar act. Least of all when I was in my right mind.

Consequently, I limited myself to glaring at the exorcist.

“.....”

But even just my glaring had a tremendous effect.

The exorcist stepped back and said, trembling, “Wh-what wicked eyes you have...!”

.....

He announced that incredibly rude observation.

Then, after asking the villagers for my name, he showered me with all manner of verbal abuse. In this country, the average exorcism by an exorcist started with a verbal assault.

That is to say, the exorcism began just like every other year.

“Y-you filthy demon!” came the scathing words of the exorcist.

“Unhhh.” For the time being, I answered in single syllables.

“Get out of her body! You nasty demon!”

“Ohhh.”

“Ha-ha-ha! What’s wrong? Are you so scared of an exorcist that you can’t even form words?”

“Unhhh.”

“How about trying to speak some proper words, you scum?!”

“Ahh.”

“Tch... What’s going on here...?! I’m getting no traction at all...!”

I got a little nervous. I was worried that my act might have been discovered, but I just kept repeating my wordless groaning.

“So the normal method is having no effect, huh...? Well, there’s no helping it, then.”

By the way, they say that exorcists who face off against many demons carry around a variety of tools at all times for fighting demons.

The exorcist Henrik left me briefly and came back holding a big bag.

It seemed to hold his many secret weapons.

“Heh-heh-heh. Look, demon. Can you see this?”

Henrik produced a small vial from inside his bag. It had an ornate and expensive-looking label affixed to it, and the water inside seemed to be a special kind of water produced by the organization he worked for. I'd heard it could cause great offense to demons when splashed onto the body of a possessed person.



I quickly signaled one of the village girls with my eyes. It was the girl who had named herself my “helper,” the one who selfishly hoped to become acquainted with a handsome guy and get him to introduce her to many more handsome guys.

Without a moment’s delay, she wedged her way in between us and whispered into the exorcist’s ear.

“Huh? I can’t get her wet? All right, then...”

I don’t like to get my clothes wet, so please use a different method.

“Okay, how do you like this?!”

The next thing he pulled out of the bag, as he shouted loudly, was an iron rod. According to Henrik, it was a tool for driving the demon from the body. It was used to whack the body of the possessed person, which caused the demon pain.

I immediately signaled the village girl.

“Huh? I can’t hurt her either? All right, then...”

Please use a different method.

“Okay, well then how about some incense with a unique smell?”

Apparently, a certain type of special incense is best for harassing demons. However, it is a double-edged sword that also causes discomfort in ordinary humans. And I am an ordinary human, so naturally, I signaled the village girl, and— “Huh? I can’t use stinky smells...?”

Again, I’d like to ask that you use a different method, so...

“Um, I’d like to ask you something if I could... How can I go about this...?”

As one might expect, after being denied three times, the exorcist was growing suspicious.

“Well, what other methods do you have?” the village girl asked coolly.

There wasn’t a single trace of the fact that she had been spitting all over the place the day before. Neither was there a single trace of joy at getting to converse with a handsome guy either. Maybe she was trying to match the

mood in the room, because she had adopted an extremely dry demeanor.

“Um...” Henrik the exorcist looked baffled as he rummaged through his bag. “I could make her listen to me read a boring book or something...”

“I see.” The girl glanced over at me. “How about that?”

“Unhhh.” I shook my head.

“Seems like that’s a no-go.”

“What...?”

“Verbal abuse only, please.”

“What...?”

The exorcist was perplexed.

I was in quite enough agony just from being tied up and forced to sit in the chair, so having any further strange things done to me would push my stress level to the limit.

I would be grateful if we could get through this with as little fuss as possible.

“All right, I’ll give it a try with only verbal abuse...”

Looking exhausted, the young exorcist Henrik stood up and faced me again.

He got close enough that he could have touched me if he had reached out his hand, and then he shouted, “You filthy demon!”

“Ah...ohhh...”

He was a little too loud, but I just maintained the blank look on my face and let out some sounds that weren’t quite words.

I got a little nervous, worried that my act might have been discovered, and just kept repeating my indifferent interjections.

Well, then.

By the way.

As one might expect, working only with verbal abuse, his repertoire of words soon dwindled. It was possible that the villagers and visitors surrounding us might start to suspect something.

And so—

“You can use a little more extreme language. It’s all right,” I whispered to him so that no one else could hear.

“Really? Okay, got it.” The young man before me whispered and nodded.

I got a little nervous. I was worried that *Henrick’s act might have been discovered*, but I just kept repeating my wordless groaning.



This story began several weeks earlier.

“Ah, what to do...what to do...?”

Clad in black garments, a man carrying a large bag staggered along the streets of a certain city, staring at the ground beneath his feet.

“What on earth am I supposed to do...?”

There was no energy in the young man’s gait. It was almost like he was possessed by a demon or something. The sighs that escaped his lips from time to time were so deep and heavy that it seemed like wisps of his soul were escaping along with them.

My, my.

“You seem troubled.”

Suddenly, a lone witch obstructed his path.

A pair of lifeless eyes peered at me.

“...Who are you?”

I deliberately cleared my throat and announced myself as “A passing fortune-teller.”

During my travels, I would occasionally spend a few days making money by doing some honest work as a fortune-teller.

“If you like, I could read your fortune?”

I happened to meet the exorcist during one of those rare times when I was doing serious business as a fortune-teller.

“Well, what kind of things should I predict?” I asked, facing the man across the folding table I had set up on the side of the road.

In low spirits, he told me the problem.

“...The truth is, I work as an exorcist, but...soon I have to do a really awful job...”

“Uh-huh.”

According to him, several years earlier, very troublesome demons had begun appearing every year in a nearby village. He had no doubt that this year as well, a request for help would soon be coming from that village.

And this year, he was the one who had to go there.

“Up until last year, the senior exorcist had been going, but...the timing is bad, because right now, the senior exorcist is on childcare leave and isn’t around...”

“I see.”

Sounds like a good workplace with substantial benefits.

“So this year, the responsibility falls to me, but... I’ve only ever heard bad rumors about this particular village—”

According to the stories he had heard from the senior exorcist, the demons that appeared in the village never responded, no matter what kind of words he threw at them or what kind of forceful methods he used.

“Instead, all they do is moan and groan.”

Apparently, the senior exorcist, who had been responsible for that village until the previous year, had returned from every visit completely exhausted. Remembering that, the young man was getting terribly nervous about his trip.

I can see how that would be a problem.

“It sounds like they’ll give me an unbelievable amount of money as a reward, but...on the other hand, it sounds like I’m going to be so tired...”

So to sum it up, you don’t want to go to the village, is that right?

“Honestly, the best possible outcome would be if I could just take the money and leave after doing a halfhearted job,” he continued.

“Is that so? That’s too honest, okay?”

“Heh-heh-heh... My heart must be growing hard, dealing with demons day in and day out...” The exorcist chuckled weakly.

I tilted my head to one side. “So what is it you want me to predict?”

“Let me see... For now, I wonder if I could get you to look at my fortune for the week after next...?”

“Got it.”

I nodded in understanding, then flipped over several cards. It was card-based fortune-telling, you see.

“Ummm...” The result came out pretty quickly. “Your fortune for two weeks from now is terrible. The worst of the worst, beyond all hope of salvation.”

“The worst of the worst...”

The expression on the exorcist’s face was truly apocalyptic. “I guess there’s no helping it, then... If a request comes from the village in question, I’ll have to run away...”

“Huh? Is it all right for you to run?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Of course it’s not all right!”

“.....”

“But it’s probably better than doing that awful job!”

The young man was already halfway on the offensive.

Poor guy...

“Um...well, don’t feel so down, please. I have certain relief measures prepared for when the fortunes are too dire.”

“Relief measures...?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, if you can, I’d like to somehow claim the reward without having to go to the village.”

“I don’t have any relief measures that are quite so handy.”

“What sort of things do you have?”

“Just ordinary lucky charms.”

“Lucky charms...?” The exorcist was a little disappointed.

“All right, let’s take a look at what kind of lucky charm will relieve your misfortunes two weeks from now, shall we? As long as you hold on to the charm, you’re less likely to meet with misfortune, and—”

Then I flipped over another card.

And the result was—

“Your lucky charm is a demon.”

“A...demon?”

“Apparently, if you carry around a demon, you won’t meet with any misfortune.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“.....”

I’m not sure how to answer you.

You’ll meet with misfortune if you don’t have a demon by your side, and—

“I think it means you won’t have a good time if you run away from your job...”

And so on.

It had been almost exactly two weeks since I’d taken a stab at telling his fortune, but goodness me, my predictions were pretty much right on the money, weren’t they?

“But, Miss Witch, look! The exorcist this time is this guy! He’s quite handsome, isn’t he?”

The village girl who had a thing for the exorcist had a photograph.

The photograph showed a handsome young exorcist, and I was very surprised.

It was the same exorcist who had gotten me to read his fortune.

In which case, this should be a piece of cake.

It was the evening of the second day since I had arrived in the village.

“Ah, what to do...what to do...?”

A young man was walking alone along the road leading to a small village in the mountains. He was clad in black garments, and he carried a large bag. He trudged toward the village with heavy footsteps.

My, my.

“You seem troubled.”

From out of the shadows, a lone young woman suddenly revealed herself to the worried young man.

“...! You’re...!”

The young man’s eyes opened wide with shock.

Standing before him was a witch with long, sleek ash-gray hair, dressed in a black robe and wearing a pointed hat.

Who on earth could it be?

Smiling impishly, she greeted him.

“Hello. I am a demon.”



In conclusion—

I’d caught up with Henrik before he made it to the village, and in addition to explaining the whole situation in detail, I had told him everything he needed to know to get the trick to work.

“So to sum it all up, if we do that, I’ll be able to take the money and go home after doing a halfhearted job...?”

He had readily consented.

Since the exorcism had come to be such a major event in the village, Henrik kept on verbally abusing me until night fell, and I continued moaning and groaning in response.

“What the hell is wrong with you?! You’re a demon, and yet you enter a

skinny little body like that?! I guess you must like little gir—”

“What?”

“Sorry.”

Even though we got off track from time to time, Henrik’s exorcism reached enough of a crescendo to seem like an overall success. Finally, it came to an end.

My body made it through entirely unscathed.

Of course, it had never been hijacked by a demon in the first place.

“Wow, thank you so much, Lady Witch...” Once everything was over, the village headman hurried over to me and handed me my reward. “It was truly a wonderful performance. I think you really fooled the exorcist.”

“Well, in my hands, it was an easy piece of work.”

Heh-heh-heh, I, the dirty-dealing witch, chuckled as I tucked the money into my pocket.

I don’t remember selling my soul to a demon, but I think I might be possessed by the spirit of greed.

In any case, my body was ostensibly back to normal, and Henrik, who had finished his duties, had immediately started preparing to go home. He was the type of exorcist who liked to leave at once as soon as he received his payment.

“Oh, leaving already?” The village headman walked unsteadily over from me toward Henrik. “If you like, please stay a few nights. Our village owes its salvation to you.”

Particularly in terms of revenue.

“Oh, no, I didn’t do anything much—”

I mean, you mostly just put on a performance with me.

“How can you say that?! If you weren’t here, the village would have been done for this year!” By the way, I digress, but since I had told Henrik the exorcist about the situation in detail, he of course knew this village had in recent years been turning a profit on the exorcisms. “We really look forward to your help

again next year, Master Exorcist!”

“Oh, next year, too?”

In the headman’s mind, it seemed to already be a settled matter that they would hold an exorcism again the following year. There was a glint in his eye that betrayed his grubby heart. He would certainly never let go of such a good moneymaking scheme.

All they had to do to get the tourists to show up was to tie up someone who could only moan and groan because of the poison in a fruit and then call an exorcist and have them perform an exorcism. For the village, nothing could be simpler.

But to put it another way, it was a really easy choice for Henrik. All he had to do was put on an act. He could claim plenty of reward money.

Consequently—

“That’s not a bad idea...”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh, not bad at all, is it?”

Even as Henrik and the village headman amicably exchanged words, I couldn’t help but feel like there was sort of a rank atmosphere hanging in the air between them.

Watching the two of them converse, the girl who had taken responsibility for being my helper during the middle of the exorcism let out a sigh.

“Sigh...”

She let out a very, very deep sigh.

My, my.

“You don’t want to ask him for his contact information?” I asked. Then I whispered like a demon in her ear, *“This is your chance to get a hot guy to introduce you to hot guys...!”*

But she shook her head slowly. “It turns out he’s not actually all that handsome, so I’m good...,” she said with a look of realization on her face.

While she was at it, she added, “I feel like he looked a little cooler when I saw

him in the photograph...” and dismissed him with a distant look in her eye.

I suppose she had expected too much and been disappointed.

Or maybe she had come back to her senses once she learned that even the handsome exorcist was still a human who was moved by greed.

As she stared at Henrik, her eyes were as cold as a snowy field in the dead of winter.

So I put my hand on her shoulder and responded, “Well...the real thing sometimes disappoints.”

Just like how the demon turned out to be a simple piece of fruit.



CHAPTER 5

A Tale of Three Cities: Because It's Something People Recommend

The Charcoal Witch, Saya, is my witch name, and the United Magic Association is the name of the organization to which I belong.

As I travel from country to country, I complete commissions for this organization and accept payment as I go.

But that doesn't necessarily mean I'm dealing with commissions around the clock.

Sometimes I do take days off work.

"....."

Morning, at an inn.

The curtain on the open window swayed and billowed as the morning breeze blew into my room, carrying with it the fragrance of the flowers standing in the planter near the window.

It felt chilly, but there was nothing strange or uncomfortable about it. The breeze lightly brushed over me like it was stroking my hair, and it gently woke me.

When I slowly opened my eyes, the sky was the color of night.

The sun, which had only just started rising, twinkled in the distance, painting the clouds in red light.

Enchanted by the early morning sky, with its vivid reds surrounded by deep blues, I sat up in bed.

The more pleasant my awakening on any given day, the more likely I was to feel like taking that day off and doing some leisurely sightseeing.

After waking to such a lovely morning, I was certain a wonderful day was about to begin.

“Good morning...”

Slowly rising out of bed, I stretched. I could feel some of my bed head hair stretch upward with me, so I patted my head to smooth it down and got out of bed.

In short, it was one of those good days.



On that day, I was in City B (provisional name). The people there were known for adopting good things from other lands, so I was able to see all sorts of scenery just by walking around town.

There were eastern-style buildings alongside brick-construction buildings, as well as buildings made of stucco or stone. There were a wide variety of houses standing side by side. No matter how long I spent walking around the town, which looked like it had been clipped out piece by piece from other towns and all pasted here, I never got tired of it. This city was popularly known as a melting pot because of the way the cityscape combined many cultures into one.

But although this collage of scenery from other lands was certainly interesting, there was also something troubling about it.

“What should I do...?”

After relaxing for a little while in my hotel room, I changed into my civilian clothes and set off into town. But I was puzzled over what to do and eventually came to a halt.

Since this was the start to a long-awaited good day, I wanted to get something in my mouth for breakfast. But since this city borrowed bits of culture from many other places, there were far too many options.

What’s more, the people of the city were just brimming with energy, even so early in the morning.

All throughout town, the stores were already open, as if it was only natural, with long lines formed in front and people crowding around the shop fronts.

Apparently, with so many cultures at play, competition was fierce.

“Whoa...”

With a frown on my face, I came to a stop in front of a certain bookstore. Apparently, it was the release day for a photo collection of a stage actor who was very popular with young women. The ladies had descended with great vigor on the store, squawking like wild birds gathered around food.

For example—

“Kyaaaah—! So cool!”

“Amazing!”

Girls swooned, holding the photo book open in front of the store.

“.....”

Other people hurried past without a word.

“Isn’t this photo just the best?”

“Totally.”

There were also a great variety of reactions from the girls who had purchased the photo collection.

Just as I would expect in this melting pot of a city!

“.....”

By the way—

This is a complete change of subject, but my younger sister, Mina, also works at the United Magic Association. She’s got black hair like mine, but hers is longer, and she’s quite beautiful. I’m proud of my little sister.

As a matter of fact, that younger sister, of whom I am so proud, was supposed to be right in the middle of a visit to the very same city at the very same moment.

Incidentally, Mina hates long lines and crowds, and she’s never shown any interest in cool guys or anything like that. In fact, she sometimes seems to have a prejudice against men.

And so, even supposing that Mina was in this place, I knew she wouldn’t show the slightest interest in something like an actor’s photo collection.

“Ahh...too incredible...!”

And so I reasoned that the black-haired girl rolling around on the ground in front of me with a euphoric expression on her face was probably someone else, who had nothing to do with my sister. Even if she was clearly wearing clothes I had seen before, even though her features told me she was born in the East, well, they did say the city was a melting pot, after all. And surely it would be no exaggeration to say that there were many diverse peoples living there.

“This is the greatest! I might just die from happiness!” the girl shouted, looking up at the empty sky.

“.....” I looked down at her.

“Ahh! What a wonderful day...this...is...” Her eyes landed on me. “.....” Then she fell quiet.

To my great surprise, the longer I looked, the more certain I was that this girl was in fact my sister.

“...Um, are you by any chance Mina?” I asked timidly.

“Nope, wrong girl. Good-bye.”

The girl sprang right up and quickly dashed away.

All right, so I was mistaken!

It was an unusual encounter.

I left to find a restaurant where I could have breakfast.

The city was very large, and there were all sorts of places to eat.

As I walked through town, I smelled something nostalgic. Lured in by the scent, I walked toward it and encountered a crowd.

There was a shop selling *dango* dumplings.

“So these are what people call *dango*! They’re delicious!”

“The people in the East love this flavor... It really hits home...”

“So sweet...”

Apparently, the treats known as *dango* had recently been introduced to this

city via a popular book. There must have been many people here who were easily influenced. The shop was doing a roaring business.

“The taste of home...”

By the way, for some reason, I could see my sister there among the crowd.

“What are you doing, Mina?”

“Sorry, wrong girl. Good-bye.”

She ran away from me again.

After walking a little while longer, I spied a cosmetics store.

Apparently, it was the release date for a brand-new product, and a crowd had formed in front of the store.

“Come take a look! When I pour magical energy into my cauldron like this, see what happens! A fairy comes out!”

The tiny little creature that floated up out of the cauldron then flitted around among the onlookers, giving them each a kiss, one after another.

This fairy cosmetic was widely rumored to be a favorite of all the celebrities in the neighboring City A (provisional name), so even though it came with a pretty steep price tag, it seemed to have gained quite a following in this city as well.

“Do you know why the celebrities in City A have such pretty skin? That’s right! It’s because they have this little fairy to keep it looking beautiful!”

Voices came from the crowd swarming around the shop.

“Amazing!”

“I want my own fairy!”

“Me too!”

Almost as if the kiss itself had had some kind of hypnotic effect, an endless number of hands shot into the air.

“Me tooooo!”

And as if she belonged there, right in the middle of that crowd was my own younger sister, Mina. She had her hand raised as she gracefully evaded the

fairy's kiss.

"What are you doing, Mina?"

".....!" Mina turned to face me as she swatted down the approaching fairy with her hand. "Sorry, wrong girl. Good-bye."

To all appearances, she was Mina. But as before, she fled from me again.

Then, after walking through town for a little bit longer, I came upon a line of girls leading to a bookshop that was in a sort of back alley.

When I glanced at the girls who were coming out of the shop, I saw that for some reason, the books in their hands covered some heavy subject matter.

It seemed to be a bookshop that dealt in unconventional books.

Well, since the city is such a melting pot, I guess there would be some strange subcultures here, too— I was gazing at the shop, lost in thought, when my sister emerged from inside, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Ah, Mina—"

In her hand, she was holding a book with heavy subject matter.

Specifically, it was a book concerning legal age limits.

"....." I turned on my heel. "Oh, sorry, wrong person, yeah? Good-bye."

My little sister didn't read such disgraceful books.

"Wait, Big Sister."

She grabbed my shoulder, hard. With a surprisingly powerful grip, she forcefully turned me around to face her. "Listen to what I have to say. This is all a misunderstanding."

"...It's all right, Mina. I'll never abandon you, no matter where your tastes lie."

"Don't pretend to accept it with open arms. This is a misunderstanding, Big Sister."

"It's all right...Mina. You're at the age where you would be interested in such things, you see? There's no helping it..."

"Don't get that distant look in your eyes. It's a misunderstanding."

Mina brought the book that dealt with age limits down on my head with a *thunk*.

“Or perhaps I should say, please don’t carelessly come up and talk to me at a time like this.” Mina puffed up her cheeks, looking exasperated.

“At a time like what?”

What is she up to? I wondered.

“Surely you can tell just by looking at me. I’m on the job.”

“No, I couldn’t tell by looking. That’s why I asked...”

“Words of praise for my perfect performance? I accept them with gratitude.” Mina sent her hair fluttering.

She added, “I’m sure even you’ve done this once or twice, right, Big Sister? An undercover investigation.”

Mina sounded exasperated as she explained it to me. She knew I was bad at figuring things out.

Undercover investigation.

It was one type of assignment people got from the United Magic Association.

Well, to give a very rough explanation, an undercover investigation means stealthily monitoring to make sure there haven’t been any incidents or accidents involving magic in a certain location. If word got out that there were members of the United Magic Association sniffing about, there was a chance that any wrongdoers would vanish into thin air. So basically, it was standard practice to assume an appearance that was not very witchlike. Of course, that meant removing our brooches. And civilian clothes were preferable. It was best not to be exposed as a traveler, so it was important to keep an eye out for trouble while appearing to blend in to the locale’s unique culture and enjoying one’s days off to the fullest.

It seemed my sister was in the middle of such an assignment.

“I was certain you had lost your mind, Mina...”

My worries had been unfounded.

In response to my reaction, Mina's head drooped with a truly exasperated expression.

"This city is a place where cultures from all sorts of places meet, so if we don't investigate regularly, this could easily become somewhere where dangerous materials could circulate. So I've been out proactively buying weird stuff."

I see, I see.

"So that includes the actor's photo collection you bought earlier?"

"There's no way I'd be interested in that kind of thing," spit Mina.

"Thank goodness... You're the same old Mina."

"What kind of impression do you have of me, Big Sister...?" Mina narrowed her eyes and glared at me.

By the way, since we haven't seen each other in a while—

"If you like, why don't I lend you a hand? With your work."

I made the offer.

But Mina shook her head very quickly.

"No thanks. You do need to rest occasionally, Big Sister."

"I happen to be taking a break right now."

"Oh really? You know, I've been working this whole time."

"You do need to rest occasionally, Mina."

"No need to worry. This job is kind of like a break."

"In that case, there should be no problem with me helping, right?"

As I said that, I pointed down the road to a restaurant that might have been found just about anywhere.

This city was like a melting pot, where all sorts of cultures mixed.

"Why don't we do a little investigation into this city's cuisine?"

After all, surely there was no problem with enjoying some food in the course of an undercover investigation?

Ultimately, Mina agreed to my suggestion, and we went to have a meal together at the restaurant.

We were shown to a window seat, and water and menus were placed before each of us. The waitress said, “When you’re ready with your orders, please let me know,” then bowed her head and left us.

The restaurant we had walked into looked like it could have been anywhere, but appropriately for the city it was in, it offered cuisine from all sorts of places. There was pasta, and steak, and fried things, and pancakes, plus nostalgic dishes from our hometown. The menu was an absolute jumble, lined with ad copy like **POPULAR IN NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES!** and **THE DISH THAT APPEARED IN THAT PLAY!** as if the variety wasn’t overwhelming enough.

I had never seen something so difficult to read.

“I can’t understand this at all.” Mina sat across from me, frown lines running through her brow. “In this city, things only get popular when important people recommend them. Even though a recommendation doesn’t offer any proof that something is good.”

My sister gazed at the menu, looking disgusted. She seemed exhausted from being crushed in the crowds all morning, buying all the popular products she could get her hands on.

I nodded.

“You’re right.” But to tell the truth, I could kind of understand the feelings of the people who lived in this city. “But the things other people have do seem attractive, don’t they? Even more so if that person is attractive, too.”

For example, in City A (provisional name), there were apparently a lot of celebrities who were so wealthy that it was almost inconceivable to people from City B (provisional name). It made the people curious to hear there was some cosmetic all those celebrities were buying, and once a crowd had formed, that was sure to draw in even more people.

“No matter what kind of thing it is, something that a popular person uses always seems great in the moment,” I told Mina in a chiding tone.

But she said, “That’s probably just how it is...” and traced her finger over the menu without much interest.

“Hey, Mina, by the way, I’m changing the subject, but—”

“Yeah?”

“Your hand is really pretty.”

I rubbed Mina’s hand back and forth.

“...Where did that come from?”

It must have given her a chill. Mina withdrew her hand with a start and turned an openly wary eye on me.

No, no, I’ve got no ulterior motives here.

This isn’t some secret carnal desire for my sister expressing itself.

“Listen, earlier, you swatted down the fairy at the cosmetics store, right? I think the fairy touched you back then, and your hand got more beautiful.”

I’d only seen it in action once, so I couldn’t say conclusively, but I suspected that the cosmetic spell had simply made its magical energy take the shape of a fairy. Mina had probably gotten the effects of the spell just by touching it with her hand.

“Here, line them up.” I took both Mina’s hands and yanked them toward me.

Once they were next to each other, it was plain to see that the hand that had been touched by the fairy was obviously nicer-looking.

I didn’t really understand much about this city, but—

“Well, I think if something is able to draw a crowd, that serves as proof that its value in that moment is greater than zero.”

I could say that much clearly.

“.....”

Mina stayed quiet for a moment, with both her hands still in my grasp, looking at me with an expressionless face that didn’t reveal what she was thinking. Then finally— “That’s probably true—” She nodded, then tilted her

head. “By the way, Big Sister, have you decided what to order?”

“.....”

“...Have you?”

“I feel like I just said something really clever, but...”

I released both her hands, and Mina rested her chin in them.

“Yes, it was a very moving speech,” she said and sent her hair fluttering.

“I don’t know, I don’t think it sank in at all.”

“So have you decided what to order, Big Sister?”

“I did. I’ll have this.”

I pointed at the menu.

It was an exceedingly average menu item that might have been found in any restaurant with **RECOMMENDED BY OUR MANAGER!** written over it.



“Another traveler once taught me that when there are all sorts of things on a menu and you don’t know what to order, you ought to choose the safest item available. The safe choice is the one you’re least likely to regret.”

“I see.”

Then Mina nodded and summoned the waitress.

She appeared before too long.

“One order of this pasta!” I said, and pointed at the menu. “And what will you have, Mina?”

Come to think of it, I never asked her.

“Let me see—” When I posed the question, Mina glanced over at me, then said, “All right, give me the same thing as my big sister.”



CHAPTER 6

Lucille Who Never Smiles

Her mother was someone who often smiled.

She smiled when saying good morning, or waving someone off, or welcoming someone home, or when it was time to say good night. From the girl's perspective, her mother was always smiling. Her mother was always kind and warm, like the sun in the sky.

She had never seen her mother get angry. She had never seen her sad. The girl's mother was always full of love.

One day, the little girl looked up at her gentle mother and asked, "Mother, why are you so kind?"

The girl's mother answered, "Because you are always such a good girl."

"So if I stop being a good girl, you'll stop being a kind mother?"

The girl's mother said, "I just might," and let out a gentle laugh.

The girl asked, "Mother, why are you always smiling?"

The girl's mother answered, "Because I am always happy and having fun."

"So if you stop being happy and having fun, you'll stop smiling?"

The girl's mother smiled. "Perhaps."

Gazing far, far off into the distance, she smiled.

"Even if I tell you something like this, you might not believe me, but—you know, there was a time, a long while ago, when I didn't smile at all."

The mother kneeled down and looked directly into her daughter's eyes.

The girl was about ten years old.

I believe I was around this age when I stopped smiling— She gently stroked her daughter's hair, orange tinged with red, and the girl seemed a little embarrassed.

“That tickles!” the girl said.

The girl was a child who often smiled.

Though she took after her mother’s looks, she was so overflowing with smiles that she didn’t bear any resemblance to the child her mother had once been. The woman was determined to do anything at all if it was for the sake of the girl’s smile.

“I want to hear a story about when you were little, Mother.”

So of course she was going to grant such a trivial request.

The girl’s mother answered, “Very well—then how about I tell you a bit of an old tale?”

She broke into a smile.

“It’s a story from when I was just about your age.”

*Long, long ago, when people told tall tales—*she began.



As a wandering traveler, I’ve never had much interest in decorations for dressing myself up.

Travelers blow through a place just like the wind and the rain, and I’ve got no need to make the sort of impression that would lodge in someone’s memory, so there isn’t much meaning in dressing up to get people to remember me. Even less so in wearing high-class garments.

So the adornments I do wear—for example, my witch’s brooch—are emblems that directly represents an aspect of my existence. I also wear things that were gifts or weird articles with interesting histories.

I’ve got a lot of those.

“Hmm...”

In a jewelry store—

The shopkeeper, kneading the air with his hands, asked how I was doing as I stared at a necklace hard enough to bore a hole through it.

“Miss Witch, what do you think? This necklace is a particularly fine article. It’s

garnished with sapphires, but we sell it for a low price—”

Generally, I don't walk around wearing fancy jewelry or things like that.

But there are always exceptions.

Exceptions, because I am a wandering traveler.

The prices of things fluctuate to a fascinating degree depending on the location. For example, jewelry that was fairly cheap in this city was sold for a rather high price in other places. Such situations naturally exist. And of course, if I could buy it where it was cheap and sell it where it was expensive, I could make a profit on the price difference.

What I was troubling over at the present moment was, basically, just such a situation.

In the city I was visiting that day, certain varieties of gemstones seemed to be very inexpensive compared to other places I'd been. The jewelry that lined this storefront, for example, was very reasonably priced.

But even though the price was reasonable, that didn't change the fact that I was looking at gemstones, and they weren't cheap enough that I could just simply buy them.

“Now this necklace, I normally sell one for thirty gold pieces, but you're so cute, I'll cut you a deal and give you three for the price of one. How about it?”

That was why the shopkeeper was trying to talk me into it. The price seemed too cheap. It was so cheap that it was making me slightly suspicious.

“Are you serious?” Ah, now I'm in trouble. “But it's a well-known fact that I'm cute...” More to the point, I don't need three of the same necklace...

“All right then, I'll throw in a free gift, too. How about that?” The shopkeeper hounded me, determined not to let me get away. He disappeared into the back of the shop and immediately came back holding another necklace.

It was a fairly pretty necklace.

“I'll throw this in, too, so how about it?” the shopkeeper asked.

“How much does that necklace cost?”

“You can’t put a price on this piece.”

“.....”

“If you buy now, I’ll throw in two of these! Now what do you say?”

“.....”

It is pretty, but somehow it seems cheap.

“Is there any chance that the reason you can’t put a price on that necklace is that it’s worthless?”

“.....”

“Sir?”

The shopkeeper looked off into the distance.

As he gazed blankly to gather his thoughts, he cleared his throat once in a forced way and continued: “Miss Witch, do you know the phrase ‘nothing is as costly as a free gift’?” he asked.

My, my.

“Well then, it’s too expensive for me to handle. No, thank you!”

Waving my hand in refusal, I left the shop.



There is a phrase “nothing is as costly as a free gift.”

It’s an instructive phrase, normally applied to things you acquire for free, warning that the associated costs may pile up in the future, causing you to wind up paying a lot for it in the end.

The word *free* has a nice ring to it, and something seems very desirable when it doesn’t come at any cost to the person getting it. But if someone gives you something for free, that transaction must have some other, non-monetary merits for the giver.

And usually, they think those merits are worth more than the money would have been.

And so nothing is as costly as a free gift.

Munch, munch.

However, there is one wonderful product in this world that has nothing but merits, despite being distributed for free. Do you know what that is?

“How is it, miss? That is our store’s most popular item.”

“It’s excellent. I’ll take one, please.”

In the shopfront of a bakery, I was chomping away, stuffing my cheeks with free samples and quickly deciding what to buy. It was a moment of supreme bliss. In other words, on top of eating delicious free bread, I also got to buy more delicious bread.

Is this as good as it gets...?

“Thank you very much! Please come again!”

“Heh-heh-heh, next time, prepare ten types of free samples and wait for my return.”

In high spirits from beginning to end, I left the shop and disappeared into the crowd of people coming and going down the city street.

I could see plenty of merit in bread being handed out for free, and at the same time, since I had gotten something for free, I felt compelled to pay back the favor somehow.

“—So what are you going to do for us?”

After walking a short distance from the bakery, a voice came from out of nowhere.

“.....?”

It was a man’s voice. I couldn’t tell who was talking, but when I examined my surroundings, I could guess where the voice had come from.

A crowd had formed on a street corner.

The man’s voice was clearly resonating despite the noisy crowd.

“You’ve been trying for a while now, haven’t you? Today of all days, we want a good result. I’ve got high expectations of you.”

Just who is over there, and just what could they be doing?

I wasn't really sure what was going on, but I was drawn in by the atmosphere that suggested something interesting was afoot. On the very outskirts of the crowd, I jumped up and down several times, but— "...I can't see."

—the only thing I could see, rather plainly and distinctly, were the backs of people's heads. It was completely hopeless.

In that case, I had no choice. I ultimately decided to take out my broom, hover lightly into the air, and look down on the crowd from above.

"Now, entertain us!"

In the center of the crowd was a gentleman dressed in fine clothing giving orders and a well-behaved young girl seated in a wheelchair.

Facing the two of them, a mage dressed as a clown waved his wand, performing tricks like sending up a puff of smoke and charring his hair, or dumping water over his own head, or simply waving his wand to no effect—well, he was really acting the clumsy fool.

Clowns are a type of jester, whose occupation is to make fools of themselves in public to get laughs.

And indeed, the sight of the clown below me waving his wand around did bring smiles to the faces of the people surrounding him.

Some laughed, their big mouths open wide. Some smiled as they enjoyed the clown's performance, like a little snack to go with their afternoon drink. Some grinned while tossing popcorn into their mouths. Some hid their faces and left elegantly. Some pointed and guffawed at the clown. There were all sorts of reactions.

It seemed like there might be only one person on the street corner whose expression didn't shift in the least.

"....."

Beside the gentleman—

—there was the young girl seated in a wheelchair.

She looked to be about ten years old. Her orange hair, tinged with red, hung down to her waist, and her eyes were blue. She was dressed in a fancy gothic dress.

She looked just like a doll.

Her polished and luxurious attire was probably what gave me that impression. The girl seated in the wheelchair sat there politely, looking very bored, without the slightest emotion showing on her face.

Surrounded by smiles, she was the only person who was not only not smiling, but whose expression had not changed at all.

Now then, what on earth is going on in this scene?

“Um, excuse me?”

By the way, there was another mage who had followed the same line of thinking as me in the face of such a big crowd. She was sitting on her broom, hovering over the crowd alongside me.

So I moved my broom over closer to her and whispered, “What is that clown doing?”

When I asked my question, the mage tossed some popcorn into her mouth and answered, “Hmm, I don’t really know myself, but you see that gentleman over there? Apparently, he’s a traveling millionaire.”

“A traveling millionaire?”

What’s with that weird setup?

“Those two have been in the city for about a week doing stuff like this.” As she talked, the mage pointed down at the girl, who was still completely unsmiling. “That girl’s name is Lucille, see, and apparently she absolutely never smiles, no matter what, regardless of what happens. That gentleman said he’s never seen her smile, not once in her whole life.”

“Hmm.”

“But the gentleman apparently wants to see her smile.”

As she spoke, the mage moved her finger to point to a sign that was standing

right behind the gentleman—it had words written on it.

It read—

IF YOU CAN MAKE THE UNSMILING LUCILLE SMILE, I WILL GIVE YOU EVERYTHING I OWN!

I had no idea whether the relationship between the gentleman and Lucille was one of parent and child or whether they were complete strangers, but it seemed like he was very concerned about her.

In other words, I surmised, he was traveling the world just trying to make the girl smile.

The mage threw another handful of popcorn into her mouth and, chewing away like it was delicious, told me, “So every performer in the city has been trying to meet the challenge.” *Munch, munch.*

“And people keep gathering to watch because they can see something entertaining for free, is that it?”

“Yep, pretty much.” *Munch, munch.*

“I see, I see.”

“Any other questions?” *Munch, munch.*

“Where did you buy that popcorn?”



The girl who didn't smile.

Lucille.

After that, I watched the performers taking up the challenge posed by the pair for a while before I noticed that apparently it wasn't free to perform before the gentleman.

It seemed it was necessary to have a certain degree of resolve in order to win the compensation for making the unsmiling girl smile.

“Now then, is there no one else who will accept the challenge?! One gold coin per attempt!”

Ultimately, the clown didn't seem to fit the bill, and he dropped his shoulders and disappeared into the crowd. A genial shout of encouragement briefly went

up in support of him. According to the other mage, that clown was always the first to appear before the gentleman and the girl, and he always failed, and he was always consoled by the spectators.

It must have been a familiar sight for the onlookers.

“I’ll go next!”

“No, I will!”

“I’m next!”

Chomping on popcorn, I gazed down at them as, one after another, hands shot up from the crowd. For the entertainers who lived in this city, there was no more convenient place for their presentations than this street corner. If they performed their art in front of the unsmiling Lucille and got her to smile, they could strike it rich. Even if she didn’t smile, their act would stick in the memories of many people. It was clear they were getting plenty of value out of paying their single gold piece each.

Although it was also possible that deep down inside, they genuinely felt they wanted to make the little girl who couldn’t smile smile.

But no matter how much the onlookers from town smiled, Lucille continued to remain expressionless.

“.....”

Far from smiling, as the artists performed before her, the girl just sat there the whole time without any expression, like a corpse. If her eyes hadn’t been moving, she could have been mistaken for a mannequin.

Even when a comedian who was famous in the city appeared before her. Even when a young man, a nameless amateur, made all the onlookers smile. Even when another girl tried the underhanded tactic of tickling Lucille’s sides.

Lucille absolutely never smiled, and many people offered up their single gold coin in front of her before taking their leave.

Gradually, the number of hands going up diminished. Finally, no one raised their hand at all.

“Oh. Done already?”

The gentleman shrugged, looking deflated.

Then he said:

“We had a few more takers in the places we visited before.”

Basically, to put it another way, he was saying that despite having so many challengers, Lucille had never smiled. It was impossible to make Lucille smile without doing something extraordinary.

“...Hmm?”

But to put it yet another way, that meant he had a very large number of gold coins.

Which meant, obviously, that if I could make Lucille smile then and there, a countless sum of gold would come my way. In short, it would likely be enough that I would never have to tediously worry about money again.

“Hmm...!” Just as I had done in the jewelry shop, I let my imagination go to work as I stared down at Lucille and the gentleman below me.

My mind started churning through calculations.

That was when the conference on money in my head was convened.

What do we think about this matter, everyone?

I posed the question to my other selves. It wasn't like I always kept a full roster of Elainas in my head, but, well, when it was time to decide on something, I used this method to examine my own values and weigh my options. I think it's a pretty common thing to do, right?

For example—

I think it's fine. Go ahead.

There was the optimistic version of me who said things like that.

You absolutely must abandon the idea; it's a waste of money! Money is precious!

There was the stingy version of me, who firmly rejected the idea.

It's dangerous to get involved carelessly. There's obviously something

suspicious about those two, don't you think?

There was also the distrustful version of me, who offered such words of warning.

Munch, munch.

And there was the version of me who was hungry and didn't really care.

That girl Lucille, she's very cute, isn't she?

There was the version of me who liked cute things.

At any rate, all sorts of values clashing in an instant is the stuff that decisions are made of, right? And on this occasion, naturally enough, various opinions clashed inside my head.

Are you listening? The girl hasn't ever smiled, even with comedians from who knows how many cities trying to make it happen! It's only suitable to conclude that they're using some kind of strange trick.

The distrustful version of me once again demonstrated her position of outright refusal.

And it's a waste of money, too. Moreover, we bought popcorn earlier, right? And it was a bit more expensive than buying it in other cities, you know? About three times the market price. In my estimation, the popcorn seller is almost certainly in cahoots with the gentleman as well.

The cheapskate version of me agreed with her, readily piling on criticism of our popcorn purchase.

Running counter to these two, who were already colluding, were the other two, who were soft in the head.

Munch, munch.

Hungry Elaina kept right on eating popcorn, in spite of the criticism.

But isn't that girl Lucille so cute? Don't you want to try talking to her a little bit?

The Elaina who likes cute things was mainly driven by curiosity.

The conference between distrustful Elaina, cheapskate Elaina, hungry Elaina,

and the Elaina who likes cute things became a total quagmire, and they weren't able to reach any conclusions.

This is obviously some kind of trap. It absolutely is. So we should give up on the idea. In fact, I think that clown from earlier is also suspicious. He was actually in cahoots with the gentleman, too, wasn't he?

On what grounds are you saying that? Munch, munch.

He probably used the clown to gather a crowd and get attention.

I'm asking you, based on what? Munch, munch.

Because that's what I would do if I were him. Anyway, I'm opposed to participating.

But Lucille is so cute.

So she's cute, so what? Should we waste money just because someone's cute?

Munch, munch.

Actually, I think it's doubtful whether or not that gentleman is truly wealthy. Maybe he has some ulterior motive?

Munch, munch.

If you're talking about being two-faced, that applies to me as well, doesn't it?

You're right. And what a cute face it is.

Are you a narcissist, Elaina who likes cute things?

Of course.

Munch, munch.

All of your munching and crunching is getting annoying!

Want some?

Oh, do you mind?

Go ahead, please.

...This stuff is incredibly bad, for something that costs three times the market rate.

So the conference was a frustrating mess that resulted in no conclusive decision.

Despite discussing it for a long time, ultimately no conclusion was reached, and the conversation got totally derailed. The conference, stuck at an impasse and reaching no conclusions, ultimately reached the point where everyone started searching for natural, moderate points of compromise, and in the end, the optimistic Elaina, who had spent the whole conference reading in the corner, ended up settling the whole thing with a single comment.

It's fine, isn't it, for us to participate? Even if we waste one gold coin, we can buy some jewels here and sell them elsewhere to make our money back, after all, she said, snapping her book shut.

So in other words, it's like the participation fee doesn't matter? I replied.

I see. That makes sense, I thought to myself.

And with that, the conference on money that had been opened in my head found a really simple point of compromise. To make a long story short, I ended up raising my hand.

"Wonderful!" The gentleman smiled happily once he noticed me. "Come on down here!"

I did as the gentleman said and slowly lowered my broom, alighting on the ground. Then, as I casually tossed my used popcorn bag into a garbage bin, I asked, "So all I have to do is make that girl smile, right? And you don't care what methods I use?"

"So long as you can pay the participation fee of one gold piece, I'm utterly unconcerned with your methods."

I see, I see.

"Well, then—"

After paying the gentleman, I walked over to Lucille and crouched down in front of her. "Hello, Lucille. My name is Elaina, the traveling witch."

As I spoke, I looked up at her.

"....."

There was no response. A pair of expressionless eyes looked back at me. The girl's face was frozen like a doll's, but her eyes alone moved around, following me.

We stared at each other, me and Lucille.

".....?"

Eventually, her eyes turned away from me, toward her own pale hand that was resting on the arm of her wheelchair.

Oh, right, we haven't shaken hands yet.

"Very pleased to meet you."

I held out my hand.

But the girl didn't move.

Since there was no other way, I picked up her hand and grasped it by force. It was just like shaking hands with a mannequin—that much was true, but she was unmistakably a living human. I could definitely feel the warmth of her hand.

And then, while I was still holding her hand, I spoke to her.

"Lucille, could I ask you to call to mind something that seems amusing?"

As I spoke, I pulled out my wand and cast a spell. "Ei!"

Even for a witch, I have mastered a great variety of spells. From the ones I use on a daily basis to head-scratchers that would make you wonder why I bothered to learn such a thing, I can use a huge number of spells.

The spell I used this time belonged to the latter category.

A white mist formed between us as we held hands, then it coalesced before her eyes and began to glow. The hazy glow then projected a single scene visible only to me and her.

This was a spell with a slightly silly name, the *Spectacle of Greatest Desire*.

It was a spell that was extremely difficult to use, one which projected a scene of whatever the person holding hands with the witch who cast it most desired, visible only to the two of them. In other words, right before us was the thing Lucille wanted most of all—the thing she found most interesting was floating

right there between us, so, well, to put it simply, I thought she was sure to smile. Because she could see the thing she most desired.

So as I was firing off the spell, I was gloating to myself. *Heh-heh-heh, I just became one rich witch!* I was confident in my triumph; however— However, as for what actually happened—

“.....”

Lucille only looked toward the scene that was revealed, and far from smiling, her expression and posture didn’t change in the least. The whole time the images of her greatest desire were visible, her expression never changed.

“What is going on...?”

Lucille’s spectacle of greatest desire, spread out before my eyes, changed rapidly, flipping through images every few seconds. A few examples were Lucille walking along eating ice cream, or Lucille watching a play while eating popcorn, or Lucille buying new clothes. I saw Lucille buying bread at a bakery, Lucille reading a book, Lucille decorating herself with a necklace.

Basically, those sorts of things.

The strange thing was that they were such extremely ordinary requests, for someone in the company of a millionaire.

And what made me feel more uncomfortable than anything else was the fact that the gentleman, her supposed guardian, was nowhere to be found in any of the scenes.

Could it be that the gentleman’s presence was not required for any of the events Lucille found most interesting?

The gentleman, who had been intently watching my series of actions, looked at Lucille’s expression and let out one big, showy sigh.

“...Unfortunately, Lady Witch, Lucille doesn’t seem to have smiled.”

In other words, it was a complete failure.

But I had been so convinced that I could make her smile.

“...Does that mean I wasted my money?”

Although I had worked out how to make money by selling jewels, losing a large sum did affect me a little. Disappointed, I let go of the hand I had been holding and put away my wand.

The mist that had been hanging in the air between myself and Lucille disappeared.

“—Ah!”

That was the first time I heard Lucille’s voice.

A quiet voice, like a little chirp, escaped her mouth.

“Well then, I think we’d better be going.”

I was not sure whether the gentleman had heard her voice, but he pulled Lucille’s wheelchair toward him and immediately left the plaza, moving quickly.

The entertainment was over.

The popcorn vendor hurriedly started closing up shop. The people who had gathered in the square each scattered in their own direction. The performers started trudging away, sighing as they went.

I alone was left behind in that place.

“.....”

I looked down at the palm of my hand that had been holding Lucille’s hand a moment earlier.

I had taken her hand in order to facilitate the spell, but maybe the gesture held some other meaning for her.

In the moment when I shook her hand, Lucille had pressed something into my palm—perhaps she had been trying to get everyone who had stood before her until now to take her hand.

Maybe she had been pleading with them using only her eyes, staying seated in her chair, without moving.

In my hand was—

—a small shred of paper, like something torn from the wrapping on some bread.

The dirty, crumpled scrap of paper had just one word written on it, totally blurry and barely legible.

Help.



“Listen up, Lucille. We are good people.”

The gentleman was always telling Lucille that.

The man and Lucille had first met about a year earlier. They weren’t related, but the man had found her close to death in a back alley and had offered her help.

He had washed the filth off Lucille’s body and dressed her in clean clothes. He had given her lots of delicious things to eat.

The man had two associates. The man who was made up as a clown performed funny skits for her every day and made her smile. The man who sold popcorn made her popcorn every day.

Lucille’s days with the gentleman were full of incredible, unbelievable happiness.

Every day of her life was filled with smiles.

Then on one such day—

“Lucille, the three of us are traveling players who roam from place to place—if you like, I’d like you to work with us as well. Will you help us?”

—the gentleman made a proposition.

Every day of her life was filled with smiles.

“Sure!”

She thought it would be a really wonderful thing if they could put smiles on other people’s faces, too. She agreed to the gentleman’s proposal, and I don’t need to tell you that she wound up going with them on their travels.

But from that day onward, her smile disappeared.

“.....”

A pitiful little girl placed in a wheelchair. No life behind her eyes, emotionless and empty, just staring into space.

Pointing at such a girl, the gentleman lamented.

“Oh, isn’t there anyone who will make this child smile? Anyone will do. Someone please make her smile! If you can make her smile for me, I’ll give you everything I own!”

Tearfully, the neatly attired man addressed the people walking down the road.

There was no way he wouldn’t stand out. And the gentleman clearly looked like someone who had a fair amount of money.

“Well then, I suppose I’ll give it a try.”

Before long, a clown performed his act. When a man dressed in a bizarre getup suddenly started doing strange things right in the middle of the street, it drew onlookers’ attention. In the end, Lucille didn’t smile, but gradually other people appeared to continue trying after him.

Then any number of performers took up the challenge to make Lucille smile. But she never did. Around dusk, the gentleman said, “Unfortunately, Lucille doesn’t seem to have smiled.” He pulled her wheelchair away, and they left the town.

They repeated this act almost every day.

The gentleman linked up with his associates in the forest outside of town. They were the first man who had performed an act on the main avenue and the man who had been selling popcorn.

“We did well again today, boys.”

They returned to their wagon, sat down around the gold they had collected just that day, and smiled.

The mournful gentleman who wanted someone to make the girl who wouldn’t smile smile, the person conveniently selling popcorn right beside him, and the clown who asserted that he was the one who could make her smile were all friends, connected behind the scenes.

It was all in the pursuit of money.

The story about the gentleman being incredibly wealthy was total nonsense. He hardly had any money at all. But as long as he had a tidy appearance, people were fooled.

After making merry all night long, the men fell asleep.

Then morning came, and another identical day began.

“Good morning, Lucille.” The gentleman put on his smart getup and served Lucille breakfast, wearing a fake smile.

The story about Lucille not smiling was also nonsense.

In truth, she didn’t need a wheelchair. In truth, she was able to smile.

The only reason she didn’t break into a smile was because she was in *a situation where she couldn’t smile*.

“—Come on, Lucille. Time for your medicine.”

After breakfast was over, the gentleman, with a smile on his face, handed her a small vial with a viscous blue liquid in it.

It was a magic potion.

Once she drank the potion and it began to take effect, for several hours, she lost all ability to move her body freely. Not only could she not walk on her own, she couldn’t even lift her arms.

Of course, she couldn’t smile either. For as long as the potion was in effect, she was like a mannequin that couldn’t do anything.

“.....”

Lucille silently took the potion, opened the lid of the vial herself, and drank it.

She knew that by drinking it, she would lose her freedom.

But she didn’t have any way to refuse.

“That’s it, good girl.”

Over the course of the year they had been traveling together, she had learned the painful lesson that, if she refused the potion, something even worse

awaited her.

The gentleman just nodded. He looked satisfied by the behavior of the obedient girl.

“I’m certain you would have died if I had left you there in that back alley instead of picking you up.” Then the gentleman touched her hair and stroked her head. “We are the ones who gave your life value.”

The man gazed at the young girl, who continued to swallow her potion with eyes as blank and dead as a corpse’s.

Then he spoke again, saying the words like an incantation.

“Listen up, Lucille. We are good people.”

Ever since she had been taken in by the gentleman and his friends, she had repeated the same routine every day. She had scrawled a message on a piece of a bread wrapper and concealed it in her small hand so that no one would find it. She had been signaling with her eyes, hoping someone performing an act for her would notice. She had been waiting, praying for help.

But no one had noticed yet, and her despair over having nowhere to go had only intensified as she spent day after day unable to smile.

It had been the same a year earlier, half a year earlier, a month earlier, and the day before.

And that morning had started the same way, too.

“—That was a close one!”

It was evening.

As always, the gentleman left the city to meet up with his companions, who would have already gathered to count their money in the wagon.

While the men tallied up their profits, the man dressed as a clown smoked a cigarette. “It seemed like the potion’s effect wore off on the girl, didn’t it?” he asked.

“Seems that way.” That was exactly why the gentleman had put a stop to their business the moment the witch had used some strange spell. “If things

had kept going like that, we might have been exposed. Thanks to that weird witch, our takings for today weren't so good."

"I think we'd better increase the dose of the potion, yeah?"

"But it's pretty expensive stuff, and it's hard to get..."

As he spoke, the gentleman looked over at Lucille, curled up in a corner of the wagon. Recently, she was always like that. Just curled up in the wagon, not even saying a word, from morning until night. He never properly saw her express any kind of emotion.

It was enough to make it seem like she never smiled, even without the potion.

"By the way, what's up with him? Isn't he late?"

When their work was over, the three of them had arrangements to stagger their timing in returning to their wagon parked outside the city. The man selling popcorn should have already returned to the wagon, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Maybe something had happened?

"Oh, I asked him to go buy some drinks, so I'm sure he's just running late," the clown answered, taking a drag on his cigarette. "Sounds like he just got back right now."

The gentleman listened carefully and heard footsteps approaching the wagon. Trampling the underbrush, the sound of footsteps slowly drew closer.

The clown stuck his head out of the wagon.

"Hey, you're awfully late. We were getting sick of waiting—"

But as soon as he started to say that, the figure of the man dressed as a clown disappeared without a sound.

A momentary breeze blew in, carrying smoke from the fire into the wagon.

".....Huh?"

What could have happened?

Inside the wagon, the bewildered man dressed as a gentleman took one step back. He wasn't sure what was going on as he stared out from inside the wagon.

It was strangely quiet. It was as if no one had ever been there to begin with.

“H-hey...knock it off with the bad jokes!”

Then, after the man just barely managed to get some words out in a trembling voice—

—someone was suddenly there, peeking into the wagon from outside.

“Good evening!”

There with a cheerful greeting and a wave of the hand was the popcorn seller.

Just kidding. It was a young woman.

She wore a black pointed hat and a black robe. Her hair was the color of ashes. Her eyes were lapis blue. She had a star-shaped brooch on her breast, and the longer the man looked at her, the more certain he became that she was a witch, and none other than the strange witch whom the gentleman had seen use a strange spell that afternoon.

Well then, let's see, who on earth could this be?

That's right, it's me.



The next day, adorning the first page of the local newspaper, there was an article regarding the traveling millionaire.

It had become clear that the traveling millionaire, who had been in the city for about one week and had been going around declaring that he would give everything he had to anyone who could make the girl accompanying him smile, had been running a scam to steal money from the local citizens.

People paid one gold coin each to the millionaire, and in exchange, they performed their acts in front of the girl. If she smiled, they stood to gain a fortune. The traveling millionaire gathered performers and passersby with that appealing story, but the reality was that the girl had been forced to drink a magical potion that made it so that she would definitely never smile.

Someone who had noticed the dishonesty of the traveling millionaire and his companions had captured them the previous evening and tied them up with ropes.

When *a traveling witch who just happened to be passing through the area* asked the criminal group for the truth, the traveling millionaire and his companions had all confessed together. It wasn't clear exactly who had done what, but something terrible must have happened, because when the traveling millionaire and his companions were brought before the city government by the witch, she had petitioned for them to be jailed immediately, the article said.

Upon investigation, the article stated, the fraud ring had spent about a year using the little girl, who had no family, to make money. They had acquired a considerable amount of gold.

The girl who had been traveling with them was taken into government custody. Fortunately, the girl herself was uninjured, and at present, no aftereffects from the magical potion could be observed, so it had been decided that she would be placed in the care of an orphanage.

In addition, there were no reports of any damages caused by the fraud ring, and it was decided that in the event that one year passed without any claims by the rightful owners of the money, it would remain in the hands of the girl.

“.....”

By the way, the headline of this news article read something like this: VICTIMLESS FRAUD CASE.

For some reason I really didn't understand, even though the traveling millionaire had been moaning and pushing around a girl in a wheelchair until just the day before, not a single person had claimed any damages.

It was very strange indeed.

News of the fraud ring's arrest was being carried to the other cities where they had operated, but I assumed the result would be the same.

“Oh, Lady Witch, thank you so much for everything you've done.”

In a café—

I set the newspaper article I had just skimmed down on the table.

The city official sitting across from me hung his head. “If you hadn't found their gang, Lady Witch, I fear little Lucille might have lost her life. I have nothing

but gratitude for you escorting her here and placing her in our care.”

My official account was that, just by coincidence, I had happened across the fraud ring, all tied up in ropes, and had taken Lucille back to the city.

I guess the men were embarrassed that they had been so careless as to let a witch of all people cheat them out of their money... On top of that, it was kind of absurd for them to think there was any chance they might get the money back, and shame got in the way of them making any public statements, so in the end, I had decided to keep quiet about what really went down.

But even bearing that in mind, it seemed the city government regarded me as the little girl’s savior.

“Is there anything I can do for you, as thanks?” the official asked, smiling cheerfully.

VICTIMLESS FRAUD CASE boldly proclaimed the newspaper article I had just been given to read. The official’s question hung in the air.

After reading the moving story of how not a single person had attempted to claim their money back, I was being asked if I wanted any sort of reward. I was basically being asked, at that point, if I could read the room.

“Well then, can I ask for one thing?”

But I am a traveler, and to put it clearly, I had no ties to that city. By rights, there was no room for me to read.

And so—

“Actually, I am a traveler—”

I requested one form of remuneration from the official. I let my greed show through.

But I couldn’t help it, you see?

Because I am absolutely not a *good person* at all.



The following day—

I went sightseeing in the city.

I went strolling down the unremarkable main avenue, lined with buildings of all colors. I was holding an ice cream in my hand as I walked under the bright sun.

Displaying poor manners, I ate as I walked.

“Mm-hmm.”

I couldn't hold the map open since one hand was taken up by my ice cream, so I was suspending the map in the air with my wand as I hunted for the right street. “Looks like there's a theater ahead if we keep going straight,” I said, lowering my gaze to the side as I did.

Beside me, walking and eating with the same poor manners, was a young girl with reddish-orange hair.

She nodded at me and said, “Sounds fun.”

That was all she said, but she was wearing a faint smile.

I had made just one request of the city official.

“I want her to come sightseeing with me.”

That was all I'd asked for.

Because I'm a traveler, you see, and from time to time, I start longing for a companion when I'm sightseeing. Well, they wanted to reward me in some way, so in that case, I figured that having the girl fill the role of sightseeing companion was just about perfect.

As long as my time allowed, I walked around the city with her.

We went, for example, to the theater, to a café, and to a popcorn vendor who was doing honest business. I let her pick out some new clothes, and we went to a bookshop.

“What do you think, ladies? That is one of our most popular items.”

Munch, munch.

Munch, munch.

After eating the free samples, I declared, “Give us all you've got, right away.”

“Such a splurge...!” Beside me, Lucille’s eyes lit up.

We spent the whole day meandering around the entire city.

It was just ordinary sightseeing, and the sights we saw were so unremarkable that it’s not worth mentioning them one by one.

But I’m sure that, for her, each sight was probably just like an irreplaceable treasure. They were probably the things she had been yearning to see all along.

“Ooooooh...”

We finished off the day with a visit to the jewelry store.

Lucille was a girl, after all, and she couldn’t resist shiny things. She *ooohed* and *aaahed* as she stared hard enough to bore a hole in the many necklaces lined up in the front of the shop.

“Is there anything here that you want?”

Standing beside her, I nimbly followed her gaze.

Wearing a frown, she sounded troubled as she replied, “I have no money...”

“If you like, I could loan you some?”

Still frowning, she looked at me. “...You could?”

“Sure, I don’t mind, so long as you pay me back once you grow up and start to make your own money.”

Even though she would be coming into a great deal of money the following year, immediately setting aside that money for the repayment of a debt would make me worried about her future.

I decided to be patient and wait until she was grown before expecting repayment.

So I asked again.

“So what do you want?”

“.....”

Trembling with nerves, Lucille then pointed to one necklace.

It was a very pretty necklace with no price tag.

Oh my.

“All right then, let’s buy two of those.”

I called the shopkeeper over.

He appeared, rubbing his hands together, and I asked, “Give me two of this necklace, and... Oh, right, and three of those sapphire necklaces while you’re at it, please.”

The sapphire ones seemed like they would fetch a high price if I sold them elsewhere. So I decided to go ahead and buy them while I was getting the necklace Lucille wanted.

In the end, on that day, I purchased matching necklaces with Lucille.

After I fastened the necklace I had just bought for her around her neck, Lucille hung her head.

“...Thank you...very much.”

“Don’t mention it. Just pay me back when you’re all grown up, okay?”

“...How much was it?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer her.

After struggling with how to respond for a moment, I decided to answer honestly.

Well, they do say “nothing is as costly as a free gift,” after all.

“Far too expensive for me to pay.”



Lucille realized the witch had been lying only after she had left the orphanage, received a lot of money, and then grown into an adult, gotten a job, and managed to save some money of her own.

She finally learned the truth when she went into a jewelry shop, showed the jeweler without hesitation the necklace the witch had purchased for her when she was about ten years old, and asked, “How much is this worth?”

“I don’t even need to look at it. Lady, that’s just junk.”

The jeweler answered ruthlessly that her necklace was a cheap thing that merchants threw in as a free gift when someone bought another necklace.

At the end of the day, even though the witch had told Lucille to pay her back once she was grown up, the witch must never have meant for Lucille to give her any money from the start.

The witch was an outright, terrible liar.

When she learned that ultimately, no price could be assigned to the necklace and there had never been any debt to the witch from the start, Lucille smiled to herself.



*

Perhaps it was because she'd had hardships imposed upon her when she was young.

Her life since becoming an adult seemed to her to be full of happiness, beyond comparison to all that had gone before.

She got a job, met a wonderful man at her workplace, fell in love, got married, had a child, and spent her days taking care of that child while managing her household. Every day was busy, although it was the kind of daily life that could happen anywhere in the world.

But to her, an ordinary life was the thing she had desired most of all.

One day, her ten-year-old daughter asked her a question.

"Mother, why are you always smiling?"

Gently stroking her daughter's head, she replied, "Because I am always happy and having fun."

That was why her life was filled with too many smiles to count.



CHAPTER 7

A Tale of Three Cities: A Story of Something of Value

It happened when I was walking around aimlessly on my own one day in City C (provisional name).

“Hey, Miss Witch! We baked that bread you like again today! How about it?”

The older woman running the bread stall shouted at me, waving her hand.

Oh, who could she be speaking to? I wondered, glancing around at my surroundings. But as far as I could see, there was no one nearby who could be called a witch. In fact, I was the only person on the road.

In which case, she must be referring to me as “Miss Witch.”

“I’m afraid you must have the wrong person.”

Even though I did walk over to the roadside stall, I shook my head and clearly denied being a witch. I had absolutely no ability to use magic.

“Huh? Oh, I sure do...”

The woman at the stall stared intently at my face and hair, and she finally seemed to realize her mistake. According to her, I was dressed exactly like a witch who often came by to purchase her bread.

She said that the witch’s hair was ashen gray.

My hair was pink.

Only the color of our hair, and our apparent ages, were different. Since our faces were so alike, the woman must have mistaken me for that unparalleled lover of bread.

“But you really look just like her... From your face to the way you carry yourself, you’re the spitting image of that witch!”

Confused, the woman peered curiously at my face.

I suppose I would be.

“I’m told that a lot.”

“Oh? Do you know the witch?”

“Well, something like that.”

I looked over the bread lined up at the stall as I nodded. The woman had called out to stop me based on a misunderstanding, so I didn't think it would cause any problems if I just said, “*Nope, wrong person. Good-bye,*” and left. But, well, each and every loaf of bread on display did look pretty delicious.

They looked so good, I could easily imagine my mistress ravenously stuffing her face with the bread she purchased here.

“...How much is this?”

Since objects exist for the sake of their owners, I figured it was probably unavoidable that my purse strings would slacken a little bit at this shop.

The proprietor answered, “Ah, that one's—”

With a nod, she put the loaf in a bag for me. According to her, it was the best seller in her shop, and the cheapest.

“Wow, but you really are just like her...”

And apparently, it was the preferred bread of my mistress.

My, my.

Evidently, we're like two peas in a pod, even when it came to food.



I have no name by which others can call me.

If I must introduce myself, it is as a broom and as one of Mistress Elaina's possessions.

Normally, as a traveler, Elaina lives a carefree life, unconcerned with time. But occasionally, she doesn't have enough time on her hands to deal with something. These are always the sorts of situations when she changes me into my human form.

Of course, this instance was no exception.

“Sorry, Miss Broom, I've got to go take care of a job right away. If you don't mind, would you take this and go shopping for me?”

That happened earlier this morning. Mistress Elaina cast a spell on me to change me into a human. As soon as she was done with the spell, she told me what she wanted.

I crumpled on the spot.

“How cruel...! Just when I finally take human form after so long...! Only to be ordered around...! In the end, I’m nothing but a convenient tool to you...?!”

“Uh...”

Mistress Elaina looked confused. She was still standing there, holding some money.

This is a digression, but thanks to the fact that Mistress Elaina always carries around her broom with her, I always know everything about the circumstances in which I am transformed into my human form. So even if she didn’t go to the trouble of explaining and just tossed the money at me, I would obey. But even so, my mistress explained everything from the beginning.

“The fact is that I was commissioned for a job by the people of this city, see, and it seems like it will be a pretty tough one. So I’m planning to shut myself up in my room for a while. I won’t have time to go out shopping, so could I ask you to buy lunch and dinner for me?”

Mistress Elaina pressed three gold coins into my hand.

Three gold coins for two meals...?

“Isn’t this too much...?”

How much are you going to eat? If I buy enough to use up three gold coins, that will be a considerable quantity of food...

“No, just two meals’ worth will do.”

“Wow, so that must mean you want quality over quantity...?”

My mistress, Elaina, wants me to arrange a glamorous lunch for her.

Is that what this is about?

I understand.

“No, that’s not really what I mean...”

“Well, you have always been someone who preferred quantity over quality, haven’t you, Mistress Elaina?”

“Good grief, you’ve been traveling with me for years, but you don’t know anything.” Mistress Elaina chuckled haughtily. “Well, it’s not wrong to say that I’m happy when I can eat for cheap, but it’s not necessarily true that I always prefer quantity over quality, you know?”

“Is that so?”

“It certainly is. I just choose the things that have the most value to me.” Then Mistress Elaina said, “Now, since you’re in your human form for once, go do whatever shopping you like. That’s why I’m giving you three gold pieces.”

“You’re being very nice today...”

“What are you talking about? I’m always nice.”

“By the way, what sort of things do you desire for your lunch and dinner?”

“Let me see—”

Mistress Elaina nodded to me, then put a finger to her lips and said, “All right, bring me something valuable.”

So basically, those were the events that led up to my shopping expedition.

I procured bread that Mistress Elaina liked and bought an assortment of foods for her dinner as well. It was safe to say that my shopping was pretty much finished.

So, holding my shopping bag in my arms, I walked down the road toward the inn.

I had quite a bit of money left over. I had only purchased the minimum of what Elaina needed. Even though she had told me to shop around as I pleased, there wasn’t really anything I wanted.

Now then, what to do with all this extra money?

“...Oh?”

I was absentmindedly going through the possibilities in my mind, when I spied a cosmetics store along the road.

I could see that there were lots of products from the same brand piled up near the entrance.

According to the sign, they were apparently mysterious products that had been imported from a nearby city where only wealthy people lived. They somehow used fairies to make people's skin prettier.

Apparently, the fairy cosmetics were hugely popular in that wealthy city, so they were now appearing for sale in great quantities everywhere else as well.

I was sure the cosmeticians of City C (provisional name) were no exception and that they wanted to sell on a grand scale like everyone else.

There were huge quantities of the fairy cosmetic.

“.....”

But they were sitting in a wagon in front of the shop.

There were no customers in the shop. In this city, no one was ordering the fairy cosmetic. It almost seemed like its popularity elsewhere had been fabricated.

It seemed sort of sad.

I looked upon my fellow objects with pity. Someone had gone to the trouble of making so many of them, and yet they couldn't properly fulfill their role, and they couldn't get any attention from anybody.

I was sure the product itself was good stuff.

So I bought some and then went back to the inn.

By the way—

I noticed this right after I bought it. The fairy cosmetic, or whatever it was called, was quite expensive, considering it was on wagon sale.

When I got back to the room, Mistress Elaina said this while holding the cosmetics I had bought: “...These cosmetics are priced ridiculously to begin with. Even at half off, they're more than twice as expensive as normal cosmetics, see? If you extend a hand out of pity, it will get badly burned.”

“Seems that way...” I'd never expected to use up all the money I had been

given. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to use all of it, but...”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it, please.” Mistress Elaina bowed her head and took the bag from me. “Thank you for going shopping. It was a big help.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I just did what comes naturally, as an object.”

“But offering thanks is also natural, as a person.”

After stretching a little bit, Mistress Elaina reached into the bag. Inside it were several loaves of bread I had purchased from the bread stall on the main avenue, as well as sandwiches and croissants I had bought at a different store after that. Just as she had requested, the food was all bread. The bag was stuffed full of Mistress Elaina’s favorite food, the very thing she valued.

“By the way, Mistress Elaina, are you making good progress?”

“As you can see.”

“I don’t really understand what I’m looking at, though.”

“Well, I guess you could say it’s kind of rough going. I’m stumped.” Mistress Elaina chuckled.

On her desk were sitting several jars of the fairy cosmetic, the same cosmetic I had just purchased. All of them were unboxed, but there was no evidence that she had used them.

According to Mistress Elaina, she had been commissioned by a cosmetics shop in this city—the same shop where I had just bought my souvenir—to investigate the composition of the fairy cosmetic.

Now, just what benefit could there be in investigating the composition of an over-the-counter product?

“According to the people at the cosmetics shop, the fairy treatment itself is apparently quite well-made. It seems to brighten up the skin exactly as promised. But it doesn’t sell at all in this city.”

“...Is that because it’s expensive?”

“Apparently, a lot of people here actually find it unpleasant that the cosmetic takes the form of a fairy that flies around. The overwhelming majority of them

are of the opinion that it's gross."

"A complete rejection of the concept of the product..."

"And I assume there are some people who refuse to use it because it's just a gimmick."

Apparently, in places where everyone was wealthy, this kind of special staging added to the sense of luxury and originality of the product and also commanded a higher price. But in this city, the overwhelming majority of people seemed to be of the opinion that the price should be lowered to compensate for the theatrics.

Well, I have to agree with them there.

"The quality of the product itself is highly rated, even here. But the price is very steep, and it has a feature that most people don't want. So the cosmetics shops decided to study the composition of the product so that they could create a cheaper imitation."

Fortunately, no one at the original manufacturer seemed to have taken notice of anyone in this city—said Mistress Elaina.

It was sad that no one was importing the expensive product they had worked so hard on, but— "I guess it's not necessarily the case that something will seem wonderful and valuable to someone just because it's expensive and rare and special."

But at the same time, I supposed it wasn't necessarily the case that some other product would have no value to anyone just because it could be obtained cheaply and easily.

Mistress Elaina stuffed her cheeks with the cheap bread I had purchased earlier. She chewed and swallowed, then said, "Well, I guess it's just a matter of putting in the work to make something new when it's an expensive thing, and putting in the work to distribute it widely when it's a cheap thing."

It wasn't an issue of quantity over quality or quality over quantity. Ultimately, it was probably a question of whether an expensive item aligned with a person's sense of value.

In other words, the quality of something couldn't be measured solely by its price.

Mm-hmm.

I staggered across the room, stood in front of the full-length mirror, and took another look at my appearance, which was the same as my mistress's.

"What about me?" I tilted my head. "Am I a high-value item? Or a low-value item?"

I had never had a price attached to me in the first place, so I had no way of gauging my own value.

Was I a good object or a bad one?

"Well, that's obvious, isn't it?"

After biting off another hunk of the cheap bread I had bought, Mistress Elaina said, "You're my object."

.....

"Mistress Elaina. That doesn't really answer the question."

"Sure it does." *Munch, munch.*

"Mistress Elaina..."

"By the way, how much did this sandwich cost?"

"It was cheap: one copper coin."

"You got it at that shop on the main avenue, right?"

"You can tell?"

"Yes. It's good, so I remember the taste." *Munch, munch.*

"Do you think I'm a good object, Mistress Elaina?"

Munch, munch.

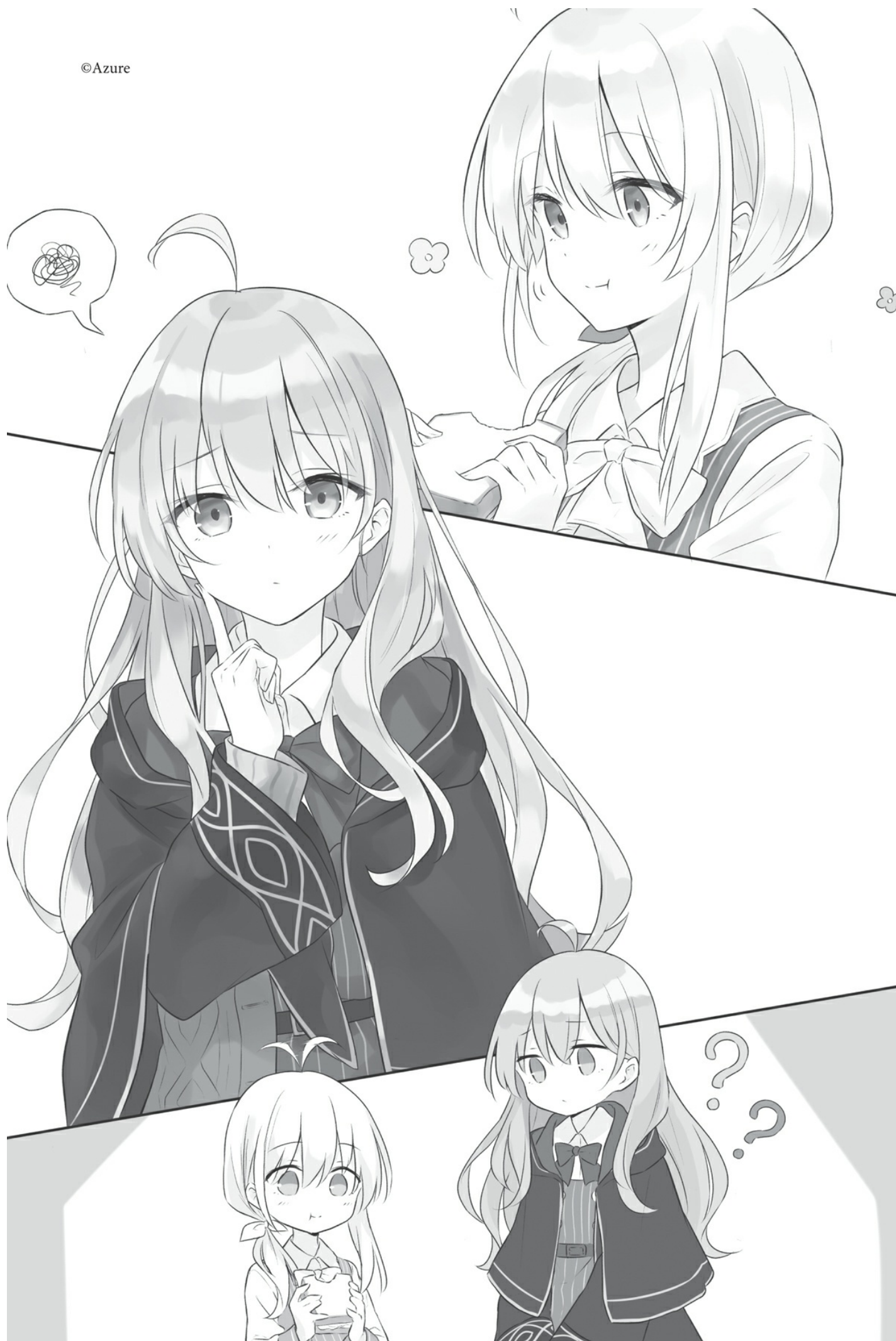
"Mistress Elaina."



About a month had passed since then.

Right after I arrived in a certain city—

“Miss Witch! You there, Miss Witch!”



The woman working at a cosmetics store that faced the road called out to me.

“We’ve got some great products in here. Won’t you come take a look?”

The woman beckoned me over with these very suspicious words. Having just arrived in the city, I was still holding my broom as I looked over the products lined up at the storefront.

They seemed to be the ones the clerk wanted to recommend.

“You’ve got a good eye, Miss Witch! This cosmetic is made in a nearby city, you see? It makes your skin smooth, and it’s very popular here right now. Would you like one?”

“.....”

Lined up in front of me were rows of a familiar package.

It was the fairy cosmetic.

But it was different from the stuff made in City A (provisional name). This was an imitation product made somewhere else. The theatrics of the fairy giving the user a kiss had been removed, rendering it an entirely ordinary cosmetic.

The price had been reduced accordingly.

“This is really a wonderful product, you know. How about it? You should try it out right now if you wish.”

Chuckling, the woman approached me without hesitation.

Uh-oh, aggressive sales tactics?

I took one step back.

“No thanks.”

No matter how cheap it was, I already knew all I needed to know about that product. I wasn’t in the mood to listen to any kind of sales pitch.

After all—

“I already have some.”

I pulled a jar of the cosmetic out of my bag.

It was exactly the same product as what was on display in the shop.

“Oh, you do have some already, don’t you?”

In the end, the saleswoman wasn’t able to pressure me to buy anything, but she didn’t seem particularly bothered. She smiled as she kept approaching me.

“That’s very good, isn’t it?”

It was more like simple chitchat than a sales tactic.

“Sure it is—”

I returned the cosmetic to my bag and held my broom.

In both hands, I held it dear.

“If not, there would be no reason for me to carry it around.”

This belongs to me.

And it’s a good, valuable thing.



CHAPTER 8

Good-for-Nothing Sario

Early summer.

One day, on my travels, I found myself in the Principality of Alessari. According to what I had heard, it was a place with a very strong sense of public order. Visitors said it was an amazing place full of kindhearted people.

For example, if a traveler lost her way, it was almost a given that someone would intervene—not only that, the people there would even walk with you to your destination, chatting all the way. I'd heard that sometimes they would even buy you something to eat or drink.

My goodness, what a wonderful place.

By the way, saying a place has a strong sense of public order is another way of saying that the people there absolutely do not tolerate deviance. The people in Alessari considered lying and betrayal to be unforgivably serious crimes.

The person who had told me about the Principality of Alessari had made a comment to that effect.

"It's a country that is uncomfortable for good-for-nothings but comfortable for virtuous people," they'd said.

I see, I see.

"Well then, it will be a good place for me."

I had given such an offhand answer at the time. Then, without giving it any particular thought, I ended up arriving in that very same place on this day.

I passed through the city gates and walked through the town.

Just as the rumors had said, everyone was great.

"Welcome to the Principality of Alessari!"

I walked down the road with the sound of a saluting soldier's greeting at my back.

“Good day, Lady Witch. Where are you from?”

“If you like, how about coming in for a drink at our bar? Oh, of course, there’s no charge, heh-heh.”

“You must be tired from your long journey. I could prepare you a very nice room at our inn.”

The town was just bursting with kindness beyond kindness.

Just by walking around a little, I had been beckoned in by all sorts of businesses. People were calling out to me. I’d gotten all sorts of information, like which of the many local restaurants were the tastiest and what trends were popular there lately.

When I approached a roadside stall selling bread, I was told to take some freshly baked loaves. “It’s fine, it’s fine, no charge. Take it and go!”

It was a good place.

A good place full of good people.

Truly, truly, the city was filled with only honest, upright, good people, to the point that it made me dizzy.

“.....”

I left there about three hours after my stay began.

Three hours.

At that length of time, it would be more accurate to say I had passed through rather than stayed there.

My time there was so short that when I left, the same soldier made a puzzled face as he asked, “Huh...? Leaving so soon...?”

It was a lovely place, filled with nothing but good people. Yet despite being surrounded by kind people, I had returned to the front gate in just three hours. The soldier seemed to find this extremely strange, strange enough that he asked me timidly, “By some chance, did the people of our city commit some act of discourtesy toward you, Lady Witch...?”

“No, no.” I shook my head. “I’m not leaving because I found it unpleasant or

anything.”

I had come for a single purpose.

And when I say purpose, I mean I had just dropped in because there was one thing I’d wanted to confirm.

“I wanted to check whether or not this photograph was widespread in town.”

As I said that, I held the photo up to show him.

It was a single photograph, taken by a good-for-nothing local.



Let me back up a little, back to late winter.

One day, I was flying over a silvery-white landscape on my broom, having just departed from a small, remote village.

The sky was high, blue, and clear, and there wasn’t a single footprint in the direction I was headed. I drew a line with the tip of my broom through the white world where no one had tread yet. Above the gentle slope, drawing a single line as I went, I proceeded along what I thought was the road, though I hadn’t actually seen it yet.

I took a breath and filled my expanding chest with cold air.

The bright sunlight lit up the desolate winter trees with red.

Riding along on my broom, I took another big breath.

Wow—

“There’s nothing out here...”

There’s really nothing. It’s magnificent...

The mountain road I was traveling down was, after all, just an ordinary road covered in snow. No matter how far I progressed down the road, there would be nothing to see; it was really just a throughway and nothing more.

There was nothing at all, as far as the eye could see.

Just the same white world continuing on until the snow disappeared.

The only thing to do was to draw pictures in the snow with my broom to kill

time. In short, I was pretty bored.

“.....?”

That wasn't the only reason, but I think it's part of why I was so quick to notice that something unusual was taking place on the road ahead of me.

Over the tip of my broom handle, in the direction I was traveling, I spied several people and one creature.

I could see that the small creature, the size of a kitten, was sitting politely in a beautiful field of snow.

It was a little bit bigger than an average kitten, and its body was covered in beautiful white fur with a black speckled pattern. Its legs were short, and its figure was round overall—a silhouette that reminded me of a snowman.

“...What is that thing?”

I squinted at it as I brought my broom to a stop.

I did not do this because the catlike creature was particularly strange. I mean, I won't deny that I got a little excited at the sight of an animal I had never seen before. But what really puzzled me was, if anything, the thing farther down the road—in the direction the catlike creature was gazing as it yawned.

There were three human figures.

“Uaaah! Aaaaaaaahhh!”

A young woman was lying faceup on the snow and screaming. She struggled and flailed on the snow and covered her face with both hands to protect it. Maybe because she was wearing white clothes, it looked a bit like she was dissolving away into the snow.

And mercilessly swinging clubs down at her were the figures of two men. The pair were dressed suspiciously in cloaks, and they showed no mercy, no restraint or hesitation; they were probably putting all their strength into harming that lone woman.

“Uaaaaaahhh!”

The woman screamed.

“.....”

I had no idea what sort of circumstances could lead up to such a scene. Maybe the two suspicious-looking men had their reasons. Maybe there was a reason for the woman screaming in the snow to be beaten.

But I had no doubt about the fact that it was not a scene I wanted to watch.

I’m fully aware that it’s a fool’s game to feel pity and bemoan the sight of someone getting hurt without knowing a thing about the circumstances. But even knowing that, as an outsider, I reflexively sided with the weaker party.

So I got down off my broom.

Then I pulled out my wand and walked toward the woman, first of all casting a spell to separate her from the two men.

“Um, are you all ri—?”

But—

“Wroooooooooong!”

Immediately after I tried to intervene—

—the woman leaped to her feet with an angry roar loud enough to echo off the snowy mountains. Her long brown hair was disheveled, and she brushed the snow off herself in such a wild manner that she didn’t seem like a grown woman.

In her hand was a wand.

Her white clothes consisted of a robe and a long skirt—in short, she was a mage. From what I could see, she wore neither a brooch nor a corsage. She must have been a novice.

By the way, she was pretty lively for someone who had just been severely beaten.

“That was all wrong, you idiots! Aaaaaagh!”

As soon as she stood up, she brandished her wand in the air. “Grrraaah!” Without hesitation, she struck one of the men with all her strength. “Rrraaahhh!” Then she hit the other one hard with a ferocious kick.

—Are you not using magic...?

All I could do as I watched her bizarre behavior from a distance was stand there with my mouth hanging open. It was very curious to see her resort to violence without using a bit of magic. But stranger than that was the fact that, though a bit of snow clung to the body of this woman as she attacked the two men with all her might, I could spot no apparent wounds on her.

Her face was also completely unscathed.

I was sure that until just a moment before, the two men had been beating her without mercy. I would have expected her to have sustained some injuries, even minor ones, and yet— “What is wrong with you guys? Why can you only move in such a plodding way?! Try to move more like people, for once!”

The brown-haired mage delivered more flying kicks to the two men, who lay in the snow.

“.....”

—Do you not use magic...?

I had been just standing there in bewilderment watching it all go down, so I had absolutely no understanding of what was happening.

The only thing I understood was that the two men who had just been savagely kicked were not human.

The bodies of the two men crumbled into bits, melted into mush, and disappeared, leaving stains on the snow.

Apparently, the two of them were like puppets, made with magic.

“By the way, who are you?”

The woman with brown hair seemed to have settled down and recovered her composure. She was still tightly gripping her wand as she turned to face me.

There wasn't a trace of the earlier violence left on her face, and she gazed at me with a wide smile. Her eyes were clear.

She looked to be in her early twenties.

She wore a smile that was, in a way, friendly and affable.

“Hello. How unexpected, to meet someone all the way out here.”

“Heh-heh-heh,” she laughed.

“.....”

No, it's impossible...

I was not the kind of person who was capable of returning a carefree smile after witnessing that whole sequence of events, from the scene of the woman being heavily beaten by the puppets, to her driving her own punches and kicks home...

“Oops. Sorry, sorry. Looks like I caused kind of a strange misunderstanding, huh?”

She shrugged. I was focused on backing away from her, but she didn't seem to pay any mind. She held her wand up in front of her face and prepared a slip of paper.

Right after she did, a mass of magical energy emitted from the tip of her wand, wavering hazily like smoke before settling into a single shape.

It took the form of a kind of square box, with a round lens on it pointed my way. The longer I looked at it, the more it resembled a camera.

“...What is that thing?”

I'm not very perceptive.

Instead of answering me, the woman pressed down on her wand with the tip of her finger.

Immediately, a flash of light came from the tip of the wand, and a slip of paper fluttered through the air and landed under me.

On the paper was an image of me making a befuddled face.

It seemed she had cast a spell to take an instant photo.

“Everything I did before, I did so I could photograph it. I was just testing whether or not I could get some photos using puppets.”

She smiled. “By any chance, did it look like some bad guys were beating up on an innocent young girl? Well, as you can see, such men do not exist.”

She pointed to the stains spreading across the snow and smiled.

.....

No.....

“If I had to say, it looked more like a scary mage was harassing two men, but...”

She smiled again.

“Such a mage does not exist either.”



After she had taken some pictures of the snowy mountains, the woman said, “My tent is just over there. It must be fate that brought us here together, so let’s at least have a cup of tea,” and showed me the way.

It was too cold outside to stand around talking forever, and I was curious about her. I figured there was no reason to refuse.

On the way, as we tramped through the snow—

As if to guide us, a small creature walked ahead, swinging its tail. I walked along, following the cute footprints it left in the snow.

But what on earth was this little creature?

I tilted my head, wondering about it, and the woman beside me turned to me as if she had just remembered something. “Oh, come to think of it, I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name is Sario. Nice to meet you.”

She held out her hand.

A handshake, huh?

“I’m Elaina. The Ashen Witch. I’m a traveler,” I answered as I lightly shook her hand. It was chilly with the winter cold.

“As you can see, I am a novice. And I’ve got no interest in a career as a mage. What I’m interested in is this right here.” She produced the box from the tip of her wand. It was a type of spell for taking photos. I went ahead and flashed her a peace sign, but she put the camera away. “I just took one of you.”

According to Sario, it was important never to take photographs unless they

would make money.

Oh, come on.

“So my face doesn’t have any resale value...?”

That’s a little disheartening...

“No, it’s just not the type of photo I want to take,” she said with a shake of her head. “I’m not interested in landscapes or pictures of pretty people and cute animals.”

“Pretty people...”

You’re making me blush...

“Do you like your own face that much?” Sario was openly astonished. “Anyway, I want to take photographs for the news. That’s why I don’t really snap ordinary scenery or portraits.”

“News photographs?”

But I don’t see how that would ever lead to you be viciously beaten with clubs by two men...

I was confused, but it didn’t seem like Sario noticed my bewilderment. She looked down at the little creature that was leaving us a trail of footsteps.

“Oh yeah, I haven’t introduced that little guy yet, have I?” Sario said. “His name is Pochi. He’s my pal.” She casually introduced the little creature.

“Pochi...?”

“Great name, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, sure...,” I replied.

It does have a cute ring to it.

“What kind of creature is he?” I asked.

Pochi resembled a cat, but his body was too round for a cat, and his legs were too short, and his fur was too long. He seemed to be a curious creature that was catlike but not a cat. Though his cries sounded just like a cat’s.

“His species are called angiers. You don’t know about them?”

“I’m a traveler, so...”

“They live in the region around here. They’re pretty rare.”

According to Sario, the creatures known as angiers primarily lived in the snowy mountains of the region.

They very rarely appeared before humans, and even when fully grown, they were smaller than house cats. They were perfectly suited to their silvery-white environment: When they were in the snow, their small size and the color of their fur made them nearly invisible.

Angiers were highly wary and would immediately take flight at the sight of a human figure.

However, Sario’s companion, Pochi, who was leading the way for us, seemed to have taken a liking to humans.

“This one’s a little strange,” she said, gazing down at her little pal.

Then, a little farther ahead, there was a tent big enough for a single person. In front of it was a single chair.

“You can sit down.”

Sario urged me to sit, then went into the tent, brought out a spare chair, and sat down across from me.

There was a single piece of wood stuck in the ground between us. Her companion, Pochi, jumped up onto her lap and curled into a ball, then she waved her wand and set fire to the stick.

The magical fire gave off heat between us as it flickered wildly in the winter wind.

“Warm, huh?” Sario chuckled.

According to her, the stick was a type of magical tool, a convenient device that could create a bonfire in a snowfield.

“So I see...” I could feel the strength draining from my whole body in the faint warmth of the fire. I let out a sigh. “But what were you taking pictures of, in a cold place like this?”

I feel like this is a pretty harsh environment without the fire.

I had just been passing through and was planning to leave as soon as possible, but from what I could see, Sario was staying in this place for a while. Long enough to set up a tent anyway.

The photos she had to take must have been important enough to warrant that.

“If you go a little bit south of here, there’s a country called the Principality of Alessari.”

When she said that, I looked around at my surroundings.

Everything was covered in a blanket of snow, as far as the eye could see. From where we were, I couldn’t see anything that looked like civilization. The Principality of Alessari must have been fairly distant from where we were.

Sario flicked her wand and brought two teacups floating out of the tent by magic.

I guess she couldn’t be bothered to move.

“You can’t see it from here, but Alessari is my home. The springs are warm, and it snows in the winter. Summertime is fairly cool, and you can see colorful leaves in the fall. There are many people who are far too nice, and I hear it has a fine reputation for its kind residents. And for having a strong sense of public order.”

“.....”

A teacup full of tea drifted in front of me.

As I nodded to her and accepted the tea, I responded, “So it’s a nice place, then?”

“Yeah. I hate it, though.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s too nice, and there’s no one else vulgar like me there.”

“You’re being awfully kind to me, for someone who calls herself vulgar.” I pointed at the teacup on my knee and the small fire dancing between us.

“No, no, I’m more than vulgar enough.”

No way. Listen, I know what this is. I know that people who torture themselves like this are good at heart. And you must be that type of person. You can’t fool me!

“By the way, Miss Witch, are you familiar with outrage marketing? Heh-heh-heh.” Sario’s expression slacked as soon as she asked me.

She made roughly the same sort of face I would have made if there was a large sum of money in front of me.

“.....”

Uh-oh, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

“People are extremely fond of angiers in my hometown, right, and they sell for a high price. I told you this earlier, but angiers are very wary, and they rarely come out in front of humans. It’s basically impossible to get your hands on a wild angier.”

“So where did you get your buddy Pochi?”

“Hmm? Oh, poaching.”

“What?!”

“Kidding. I just bought him.” I couldn’t be sure the extent to which she was telling the truth, but the companion on her lap let out a yawn at her words.

Sario looked down at him lovingly and stroked his soft fur as she said, “Recently, people have been getting wind of the money they can get for the sweet, adorable angiers, and there’s been a never-ending stream of people trying to poach them. Do you remember those puppets that were beating up on me earlier?”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

I think I’ll be seeing them in my nightmares for a while.

“Guys who look like that have been poaching the angiers in these hills lately. This area is pretty remote, and the angiers that live here aren’t as cautious as the ones that live in other places. If you lure them in with food, you can easily

catch them.”

“Not very cautious...”

My gaze automatically dropped to her lap.

“No, this guy’s different.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I can pretty much tell what you want to say.”

How rude! said Sario’s expression.

She had said that she wanted to take news photos, so I assumed she probably wanted to photograph a scene of the angiers being hunted. But— “So then, the reason why you came to this secret spot where the angiers are being poached was to take pictures using those strange puppets? What on earth for?” I tilted my head in puzzlement.

“No, no, what I really wanted to do was take real pictures, okay? I wanted to track the actual hunters doing the poaching and capture their crimes on film so that I could take the evidence back home. But for some reason, I seem to be having bad luck these past few days.”

“You weren’t able to catch them red-handed?”

“I’ve just spent the last few days playing with wild angiers...”

“Sounds like the poachers are the wary ones...”

“And that’s why I brought out my last resort.”

She waved her wand as she said that.

When she did, snow from all around her assembled itself into a human form. Staring steadily at the figure, she nodded. “Well, I guess that about does it.” Then she took a small bottle out of her pocket.

When she opened the lid and poured the liquid onto her snow sculpture, the change was immediate. It transformed into one of the men that had been dismantled by Sario earlier.

“What I’ve got here is a special magical potion, you see, and when I apply it to snow, I can make a golem that looks just like the real deal. As long as no one

punches him too hard, they shouldn't be able to tell he's a fake."

"....."

After listening to that much of her story, I had more or less figured out what she had been trying to do.

She said, "I couldn't manage to photograph them in the act, so I used these guys and my buddy there and tried to reenact a poaching scene."

"...But it was basically impossible to take photos while you were using magic to puppet the golems?"

"You know it. That's why I ended up wrecking them back there, heh-heh-heh." She laughed.

In short, it hadn't gone well.

I'm sure it had been quite difficult for her to control two complex spells at the same time. Plus, since she was trying to capture photographs for the news, she obviously didn't want to compromise with any sloppy pictures.

And that's why I can't really understand why she seems to be compromising with these fake photos, but...

"If I can distribute the pictures I've taken back home, they might sell for a lot to the newspapers. And if they take off, my name might get famous, too. It'll be all good news, a cause for celebration."

"Basically, as long as you can make money, nothing else matters?"

"Well, yeah, pretty much."

Humans are creatures that crave excitement.

If word got out that these cherished creatures were being overhunted by some evil poachers, it was sure to become a topic of conversation across the land, though I'm not certain if this was a good thing or not.

And the overhunting of the angiers was a good subject from which to profit.

"But your photographs are fakes, right?"

"But it's a true fact that they're being poached. If I can take some extreme photos, it will draw attention to the issue, for better or worse."

Bad news travels fast, after all.

But resorting to such extreme methods meant that at any point, the photos might be taken out of context and cause an uproar unconnected to their original purpose.

Once that fire was ablaze, there would be absolutely no way to control it.

“Even if people get fired up, you might not stick in anyone’s memory, in the end.”

“But the blaze will warm my pockets.”

Between us, the small fire was still giving off faint warmth as it flickered in the wind.

I see, so as long as you get your hands on some money, that’s all that matters, I suppose.

“I guess you did describe yourself as a bad person...”



She didn't seem like someone who would have come from a land known for its nice people.

"By the way, Miss Witch, I hated my hometown. It was full of nothing but kind people. But among my hometown's traditions, there's just one that I like."

That's very abrupt.

"What is it?"

I tilted my head questioningly as I swallowed a mouthful of tea.

She said, "In my hometown, there's a custom that if you are treated to a cup of tea, you have to do something in return. Well, it doesn't have to be tea, anything will do, but the point is that if someone does something nice for you, you have to do something back. It's a lovely tradition that is fitting for somewhere where the people are all brimming with kindness."

"....."

"By the way, the folks from my hometown are sticklers for manners. Really, any rude person who doesn't return the favor after accepting someone's charity can expect to have a terrible time and even be beaten to a pulp."

"....."

"And I was thinking of resuming my photography after this."

She finished saying all that and drained her cold tea.

She seemed to have swallowed the rest of her words along with it, but her behavior spelled out her intentions quite clearly.

Rather than utilizing her helper puppets, which were sitting off to the side, completely deflated, she must have wanted to take photos that were more true to life.

Oh my.

"Are you serious?"

"I was very clear about this. I told you I'm a very vulgar person."

"I thought you were just being self-deprecating."

“It’s the truth.”

After draining the tea that still remained in my cup, I gazed up at the wide blue sky. The tea, which had still had some heat to it, quickly warmed my body.

When I exhaled, my white, cloudy breath gently fluttered through the air, swaying the flames between us.

“Charity and vulgarity sure look a lot alike...”



So through that sequence of events, I wound up doing some sketchy stuff in the snowy mountains with Sario.

In short, we went to take fake news photographs.

The idea was that we would use the puppets that looked like poachers to take the photos. But before that, for the dry run, I took the place of the puppets and assumed the role of a poacher trying to capture the rare creature known as an angier.

“Okay, first, strike whatever pose you like.”

With these rough instructions from Sario, the photography session began.

Flashes of light came from her wand.

“Heh-heh-heh... I’ve had my eye on you for a while... You’ve got very nice fur, haven’t you...?”

Sitting in a snowbank, I had Pochi in my lap and was stroking him.

“Myau!” cried the little creature. He was purring comfortably. If he hadn’t been so round, he really would have seemed like an ordinary cat.

This is actually quite pleasant...

“Hey, hey, wait a minute! Do you think the poachers pet the angiers with plenty of love like that? Try handling him more roughly, like an object!”

“Sure...”

Sario demanded a do-over. It seemed we were a little off from the image that she wanted.

“Okay, try using this thing.”

As she said that, she handed me a pole with some meat attached.

“Uh, okay.”

I did as I was told and tried to follow her instructions.

Flash, flash.

“Come on, you want this? Heh-heh-heh... Jump up and get it!”

“Myau!”

Pochi jumped up above the snow. He was looking straight at the meat. He chomped into the meat and spattered the snow with meat juices as he devoured it.

He’s so wild...

“Come on, what’s wrong with you?! Eat more fiercely, there on the snow! Listen, little buddy! You can’t eat your meat so neatly!”

“.....”

She’s even wilder...

“All right, next, try and stuff Pochi into this bag,” she said, and she handed me a large burlap sack.

“Uh...”

Again, I did as I was told and tried to follow her instructions.

Flash, flash.

“Will something like this do?”

With a shout, I brought the sack down on top of Pochi.

“No, no! Cram him in the bag with more of a sleazy look on your face!”

Flash, flash.

“Wait, I’m not sure how to give you the authentic expression you’re looking for...”

This is just the dry run, right?

“That expression is just right!”

Flash.

Sario continued taking photo after photo, creating image after image on slips of paper of me and the angier playing.

It seemed like I was just playing with a small creature in front of a noisy photographer, but Sario told me we were doing very important work.

“—Well, that’s the general idea, I guess.”

Sario showed me all the photos she had taken.

She was going to use pictures of me playing with Pochi as reference material for the real photos.

It was time to start taking the fake news photographs.

Sario and I took our wands in hand and stood beside each other.

We were looking ahead at the poachers—or their standins—and one angier.

“Make them take this pose.”

Sario showed me one of the photos we had just taken.

“Sure thing.”

I waved my wand and moved the puppets.

It must have been next to impossible for her to act as photographer while also controlling the puppets with magic. So we had decided to divide the tasks to complete the photo shoot.

I controlled the puppets, and Sario took the pictures.

In other words, I was completely complicit in her good-for-nothing business.

“This will make it hard for me to go visit your hometown, I suppose...”

The camera flashed as the puppets chased Pochi around.

“Huh, why?”

Flash.

Sario looked at me with confusion on her face as she took more pictures. “You

can just go. Don't worry about it. If you are concerned about the photos we took in the dry run, I'm planning to throw those away, so there shouldn't be any evidence left of you assisting me with my work."

"It's more of an issue of conscience."

Even if there was no evidence left behind, that wouldn't erase the fact that I had participated in this scheme. All the more so if the photos turned out to attract attention throughout the land, as she anticipated they would.

Because if I visited, I would be confronted with the result of our picture taking.

Sario would probably turn a profit from the fake news photos. They would probably attract attention. The people of her hometown would probably start taking action to safeguard the adorable angiers they kept as pets.

But it didn't seem likely that everyone would commend Sario for her work. Naturally enough, there were sure to be some people who would be upset about the photos of the adorable creatures suffering through a terrible ordeal.

"You're taking these photos with the understanding that there's a possibility that you yourself will be the target of everyone's anger, aren't you?"

Her plan was to show off the fake photos, attract a lot of attention, create an outrage in her hometown, and then profit off the whole thing.

Of course, there was always the possibility that she would get burned by the fire she herself ignited.

Flash.

As she continued to take photos, she answered me. "Of course. Otherwise, I wouldn't be taking these kinds of photos at all."

"....."

Beside her, as she continued snapping photos, I continued controlling the puppets. On top of the snow, the little creature known as an angier had been stuffed into a sack by the puppets. A bored-sounding "myau" came from the sack.

On the face of it, it looked like a miserable, pitiful scene.

Anger was certain to spread when Sario showed the picture to all the kind people who lived back home.

“Could I ask you something?”

“What?”

Flash.

She continued taking pictures.

Pochi leaped nimbly out of the burlap sack and rolled across the snow. Without a moment’s delay, Sario said, “Let’s take this one next,” and held up a photo of me she had taken earlier. I moved the puppets as she instructed.

Flash, flash.

We went right on staging the fake poaching scene.

I asked my question.

“Why are you taking such a roundabout route?”

If it was money she was after, surely there were easier ways to make it. I was almost certain it would be a safer move to continue taking honest photographs, without going out of her way to risk drawing the ire of the people of her hometown.

I had no doubt she would be able to draw plenty of attention if she engaged in outrage marketing like she said she was going to. And there was a chance that she might actually become famous.

But at the same time, there was the risk that she would lose everything.

I wondered if the images she was photographing were worth that risk.

As she kept snapping away, Sario told me, “The first time anyone ever brought an angier into my hometown was five years ago.”

According to Sario—

The angiers, with their small, adorable appearance, became popular in the blink of an eye. They were kept as pets in many households and loved by many families. Although they were expensive, everyone wanted one. The whole country became obsessed with them.

However—

“About half a year after they were brought in, there was a rash of angier abductions and abuse cases.”

Maybe it was because their popularity made them so expensive.

Originally, wealthy people had been the main customers for the angiers. Once the angiers started to get popular, there had been an increase in the number of burglaries targeting the wealthy.

The burglars hadn't been after money. They had been targeting the small creatures, the angiers.

And around the same time, the angier cruelty cases had also started to show up. One after another, angiers were found lying in back alleys, injured or dead.

“Even though everyone there is supposed to be a good person, there are a few good-for-nothing bad guys. The people of my hometown concluded that someone from somewhere else was stealing the angiers and hurting them.”

The Principality of Alessari was known to be home to only good people.

Unsurprisingly, the people had started a frenzied search for anyone suspicious, in order to find the culprit who had been stealing and hurting the angiers.

And almost immediately, one suspect had emerged.

“Her name was Kaena. At the time, I think she was only about seventeen. She was kind of a creepy mage. She had black hair and black eyes, and she always wore nothing but black. She had no friends and was really quiet; she hardly ever talked to people.”

Kaena was apparently employed by one of the newspapers as a photographer. But perhaps because she didn't have much in savings, or because her pay wasn't steady, she always wore cheap clothing and ate cheap meals.

The thing that had directed suspicions toward creepy Kaena happened right after the uproar over the abductions and abuse began. One of the good citizens who was out patrolling as part of the hunt for the angier thieves had just

happened to see something.

Kaena had a great many photographs of angiers in her possession.

“...And for that reason alone she was a suspect? That Kaena person?”

Simply for having photographs.

However—

“It was more than enough reason for people to look at her with suspicion. At the time, angiers were not creatures that could be easily purchased. The overwhelming majority of people were of the opinion that it was strange for a seventeen-year-old child to have bought one.”

Suspicious eyes had turned on Kaena.

Before long, the people had come to believe that the suspicious girl Kaena was a loose cannon who had been injuring the stolen angiers, then abandoning them in back alleys after preserving their suffering in photographs.

Before long, suspicion had turned to conviction in the minds of the people.

After all, she had always been creepy, so the people of the Principality of Alessari concluded that Kaena was their villain.

Once they had decided she was the culprit, more evidence had appeared, rising like bubbles to the surface.

For example, there was the fact that she had been hanging around in back alleys a lot lately. Or the fact that for the past few months, she had been acting differently than before and had started talking to people. Or the fact that she always seemed to want to get home early.

The people had thought for sure that all these things must have been because she was stealing angiers and tormenting them to blow off steam.

The people, flooded with feelings of righteousness, had descended on Kaena's workplace. They'd exposed the many evil deeds she had committed. They'd gone around spreading the news about how bad of a person she was.

Once things had made it to that point, there was no need for evidence anymore.

In the minds of the people, she alone was the perpetrator who was abusing the angiers, and the people's word itself was the proof.

And so the people had heaped their judgment upon the girl. Day after day, she would be showered with shouts of abuse just for walking down the street.

But after a little while, a certain fact had suddenly come to light.

"It turned out that the person who had been going around abducting angiers was a merchant who had been coming and going from another country. Apparently, once the merchant laid eyes on the profitable angiers, he planned to steal them from the houses of rich people, force them to breed, and make money off them. He was arrested when he was breaking in to steal an angier, and the truth came to light."

"....."

Basically, it was all a misunderstanding.

"Kaena had started hanging around in back alleys because she was trying to protect the angiers."

The small, adorable angiers mostly lived in the snowy mountains. The creatures must have been very stressed when they were suddenly brought to the Principality of Alessari, where there were four different seasons. Apparently, the stress had caused many of them to bang their heads against walls and to run away from home.

"This fact didn't become very widely known, but there were a lot of rich people who didn't take good care of their angiers and abandoned them in back alleys. They purchased them because they were charmed by their sweet outward appearance, but they must have been bewildered when the creatures suddenly started acting strangely. If they abandoned their pets in back alleys and kept silent about it, they could pretend they had been stolen and play the victims."

"And Kaena had been looking after the abandoned ones?"

Sario nodded.

"All the angiers she had rescued were turned over to a government shelter. In

other words, she was completely unconnected to the abduction incidents.”

“...And what about the pictures she had?”

“The guy had only seen pictures of Kaena’s own angier.”

The girl, who was seventeen at the time, had no friends and was always by herself. When the angiers had started to become popular, Kaena, like many people, had been taken with the creatures’ adorable appearance.

So she had cut back on her daily expenses and forgone fashionable clothes in order to save enough money to buy one.

But the people of the city hadn’t believed a word she said. Even though the staff at the facility had spoken up and insisted that it was all a misunderstanding, their appeals hadn’t reached anyone’s ears.

The tragic misunderstanding had allowed the people’s feelings of righteousness to run wild.

“Ultimately, the incident came to a close with the arrest of the merchant. Happily ever after. The land was peaceful once again. No one paid any attention to what became of the pitiful seventeen-year-old after that.”

Flash.

As Sario continued her story, she took more pictures of the angier in the snow, starting up again as if she had just remembered what she was doing.

“It’s strange, you know. Those guys in town think that just because they caught one merchant, that all the bad guys targeting angiers have disappeared from this world. Even though there’s no way other people don’t have their eyes on such rare and lucrative animals.”

If one person had been caught stealing, it followed that there were others.

“For example, who knows how many people have located the angiers’ habitat and are poaching them, or trying to anyway?”

“I’m sure.”

Flash.

Sario continued taking pictures. “That’s why I’ve got to show everyone. I’ve

got to show them that there are still dirty merchants out here, you know?”

“...And you don’t care if the photos you show them are fakes?”

“It’s fine, obviously. After all, nobody back home cares about the truth anyway—,” she answered.

I looked over at the girl who was still taking pictures beside me.

A photographer and magical novice dressed in a white robe. She had brown hair, and just by looking at her, I could see that she was a different person than the Kaena who had been featured in her story. But—

“...Where is Kaena now?” I asked her.

She stopped taking pictures and looked at me. “She doesn’t exist anymore.” With a wicked smile on her face, she said, “She changed her hair and her name and decided to live as a good-for-nothing mage, you see.”



The seasons changed, and it was early summer.

“Welcome to the Principality of Alessari!”

I walked down the road with the sound of a saluting soldier’s greeting at my back.

I had heard this was a wonderful place, with a strong sense of public order, and that it was inhabited only by kind people.

It was typical for people here to be very considerate. For example, if a traveler was wandering aimlessly down the street, it was a given that locals would call out to her—and not only that, they would even walk with the stranger to her destination, chatting all the way.

“Good day, Lady Witch. Where are you from?”

“If you like, how about coming in for a drink at our bar? Oh, of course, there’s no charge, heh-heh.”

“You must be tired from your long journey. I could prepare you a very nice room at our inn.”

And so on.

“...Uh, no, I’m good, thanks.”

Honestly, having so much goodwill hurled at me made me recoil. Right from the outset, I didn’t intend to stay for very long.

So I turned down all the generous people who approached me. “No, no, I’m fine, oh-hoh-hoh.”

According to what I had heard, in this land there was apparently a saying that you had to pay back any kindness you were given. Knowing that, I was even less inclined to ask for anything from the people here.

“Good day, Lady Witch—”

“If you like, how about—?”

“You must be tired from your long journey—”

But even after I declined, it wasn’t long before more people approached me with the same types of offers.

“.....”

So pushy...

Their good intentions are very, very pushy...

“No, uh, really, I’m all right...”

This overbearing goodwill was probably one of the reasons why the Principality of Alessari was renowned as a wonderful place. Supposedly, it was common knowledge in nearby lands that the people in Alessari believed in helping one another. Anyone who did not appreciate this mentality of cooperation was unlikely to ever go there in the first place, because they would find it so irritating.

What it all came down to was that the only people who visited this place were the people who already approved of their customs. So naturally, every appraisal of the city claimed it was a relatively good place.

So I walked on and quickly became fed up with the actual place, which was completely unlike its reputation.

I walked down the main avenue for a little while and happened upon a bakery

stall.

There was a calming fragrance wafting gently through the air. My legs floated me toward the stall just like a fluttering butterfly tempted by a flower's nectar.

"Oh, miss, you're a traveler, right? Welcome, welcome!" A plump middle-aged woman greeted me. "The bread's freshly baked!"

The fluffy loaves of bread were lined up neatly along the front of the stall. They seemed to be calling to me sweetly, "*Come on, go ahead, eat us!*"

Come to think of it, I considered, *I haven't had lunch yet—*

"All right, I think I'll buy one—"

My hand did not hesitate as it pulled out my wallet. I, the traveler in question, frequently found myself helpless in front of bread. It's because it smells so delicious, you see. I just can't help it.

The woman running the stall watched me loosen my purse strings and spoke up.

"No, no need, it's free. Take it and go!"

Free...!

"Huh, I can have it for free...?"

"You're such a cute traveler, so it's a gift! *Oh-hoh-hoh!*" The baker chuckled.

A gift? Is it okay to accept? Could this be the best thing that's ever happened...?

Normally, I would have readily accepted this favor with a thankyou. Normally, I would have already accepted the bread.

But I hadn't forgotten.

In this land, if you accepted any favors, you had to pay them back somehow.

Which meant if I accepted bread for free, I would be obligated to repay the favor. Probably, if I was a good person, I wouldn't mind paying her back as thanks for getting bread.

But frankly speaking, I'm kind of a vulgar person.

If she was giving it away for free, I wanted to get it for free.

I mean, I didn't have any particular objection to paying money for it.

"No, no, it's fine. I'll pay."

"I said you don't need to pay. It's a gift, to celebrate your visit! Take it and go!"

"No, no, I couldn't. I'm paying."

"It's fine!"

"No, no, no way."

To be honest, I wanted to pay the money and be done with it. I had no intention of developing any further relationship with this baker. I had only just arrived there, after all. I wanted to keep this strictly a relationship between customer and shopkeeper.

After we argued back and forth for a while, the woman backed down.

"No helping it, I guess. All right, I wonder if you would donate to our fundraiser, then? How would that be?"

She set a box up on the counter.

"....."

It was a collection box with a photograph affixed to it.

It was a picture of a small creature stretched out on the snow.

"This is called an angier. In our land, it's a popular animal to keep as a pet."

I couldn't take my eyes off the photo as the shopkeeper explained things to me.

She told me how the creatures known as angiers had first been brought to their land about five years earlier. They were rare and expensive but immediately became popular because of their adorable appearance, she said.

Reports of their popularity immediately spread among the merchants as well.

The merchants learned that the people were eager to purchase angiers and started to poach the animals in the mountains.

The poachers forcefully captured the angiers that ran through the snow trying to escape, handled them roughly, and sold them off wholesale to the Principality of Alessari.

The photograph on the box, which depicted an angier imprisoned in a cage sitting on the snow, showed the true state of the pitiful angiers. The picture had briefly captured the public's interest.

In a bad way, of course.

"This photograph gave us all a big shock. After all, no matter how you look at it, *this picture must have been taken by one of the poachers overhunting the angiers, right?*"

"....."

"Of course, the mage named Sario who took this picture and made money off it was driven into exile. She was complicit in the angier poaching, after all."

She told me that the evil mage Sario was widely condemned. On top of everything else, Sario had distributed her photos and commissioned an article about the overhunting of the angiers, which some said had only led to a further increase in poaching.



Because she had raised the issue, many more people learned where to find the angiers' habitat.

Before, when no one knew where the angiers lived, the poachers had just captured a few of them in secret.

It was all very sad, a miserable state of affairs.

The people were deeply enraged by it.

"So we drove Sario out and started focusing on conservation."

Apparently, every place in town was doing fund-raising for angier conservation. And, the baker told me, during their conservation efforts, the local mages also periodically uncovered poachers in the mountains.

They were protecting the angiers from bad people.

But if we were to reword these facts—

"I could also take that as meaning you started to protect the angiers after this photo was made public, right?"

It seemed to me like if Sario hadn't raised the issue, the angiers might have gone on getting overhunted forever.

"Ha-ha-ha, what's that? Are you trying to suggest that we only started protecting the angiers because Sario took that photo?" The bakery owner roared with laughter. "You've got it all wrong, Miss Witch. The mages doing the conservation asked the local people in the area. And the word is that people from our lands were going around exposing poachers long before Sario's photograph made the rounds."

"...Is that true?"

"Sure is." The woman nodded and said, "It's just that we ramped up our conservation efforts after her pictures caught a lot of attention and kicked up a big fuss."

What they were doing hadn't changed one bit—she told me.



Backing up, to late winter.

I spent a little bit of time with Sario up in the snowy hills, then went on down the mountain.

She told me she was planning to spend a little more time in the mountains taking photographs, then return to her hometown. “I’ll stick it out a little longer, in hopes that I happen across some poachers,” she explained.

I didn’t really understand her reasons for staying, when she had already taken her photographs, but I reasoned that as a photographer and journalist, Sario must be fastidious about her work.

Without really looking back, and without running into any other people, after several hours, I arrived safely at a village at the foot of the mountains.

It was my first time visiting that village.

I didn’t bother to count properly, but there were so few houses that it would have been easy enough to count them, and there was no gate and no one standing watch. There was also no snow. Overflowing with greenery, the village seemed peaceful.

“Oh! A mage?! We welcome you!”

As soon as they saw me arrive at their village riding on my broom, the villagers seemed completely delighted.

“Come now, come in! You must be exhausted!”

“Please, you must come try our village’s specialty!”

Oh my, they seem very friendly.

Wearing a polite smile as I accepted their hospitality, I floated along as they showed me into their village.

“Where did you come from?”

“Please, you must stay at our inn tonight.”

“I’ll bring you something to eat at the inn later.”

And so on and so forth.

The kindness of the people in the village was dazzling, and oppressive, to the point that I was convinced their heated passion must have been what melted

the snow.

The wooden houses standing here and there throughout the village were old, and in the gardens, surrounded by fences, I could see small children and angiers playing together.

I guess raising angiers must be in fashion in this village—

Could this possibly be the hometown—the Principality of Alessari—where Sario was born...?

I had that thought for a moment but decided that the village was too close for that to be possible. If I recalled correctly, Sario had told me that her hometown was much farther south.

“Aren’t they adorable?! Our village’s angiers are very sociable!” One of the villagers showing me around told me, with plenty of enthusiasm, “In our village, we raise angiers to be pets, you see, and sell them in neighboring lands. We’re famous enough for it that if you ask about the hometown of the angiers, folks will point you our way!”

“Wow...”

According to the people in the village, the angiers had been raised there since antiquity. After being kept by humans for many years, the angiers basically had no fear of people.

They also told me that the angiers living in the nearby mountains were probably the wild descendants of animals that had escaped from the village long ago.

That explained why they had little wariness of humans; if they had originally been bred in the village, it was perfectly understandable.

When the people of the village had told me that much— “But recently, poachers have started coming into the mountains.”

They also spoke up about a problem the village had been dealing with recently. Apparently, word had gotten around from somewhere that the sociable angiers could be captured in the nearby mountains. That, plus the fact that the creatures could be sold for high prices in certain distant lands, had led

to an increase in the number of poachers.

“...I see.”

I glanced around and saw that there were several men slumped on the ground in the shade of some nearby trees. They were tied up with ropes.

“So then, what’s the deal with the people over there?” I asked.

“A group of poachers.”

It must have been a familiar sight for the villagers.

They answered me quickly.

They said:

“Recently, a mage who’s been staying up in the mountains has been apprehending each and every group of poachers for us.”

Apparently, the weird mage had been going around catching poachers because they were “interfering with her photography.”

I reasoned it must have been the girl who had told me that she had gone into the mountains because she wanted to get rich doing outrage marketing.

I’m truly amazed.

“What about that is good-for-nothing?”

As I thought, charity and vulgarity sure look a lot alike.



CHAPTER 9

The Story of a Certain Photographer

As a traveler, when I'm wandering through foreign lands, people often come up and talk to me.

I wear a black robe and a black triangular hat. I've got my star-shaped brooch. I'm always dressed more or less like that. Now, I'm not sure if it happens because of my obviously witchy appearance, but when people abruptly come up and talk to me, most of them seem to either immediately realize I am a traveling witch or at least have some inkling.

No matter how naturally I behave, I always stand out as an outsider.

Such was the case with the person who came up to speak to me while I was savoring my dinner alone at a restaurant that evening.

"A traveling witch drinking alone makes a lovely picture." The woman sitting at the table beside mine was staring at me with her chin resting in her hands. Her black hair swayed, and she peered at me with black eyes. "Although it would be even nicer if your drink was alcoholic..."

When I looked over, I saw that her face was a little flushed and that an empty wineglass was sitting on the corner of the table. She looked drunk.

"Good evening."

I answered her with a bob of my head.

Well, I am often hassled by drunkards.

After that, the strange woman asked me all sorts of questions. Where was I from? How many years had I been traveling? Where was I planning to travel to next? Were there any beautiful places nearby?

I had been getting bored, so I honestly answered all the woman's questions one by one. If there's no reason not to, it's best to answer honestly.

And after she'd asked me all that, I was getting curious about her, too, so I asked, "What country did you come from?"

“Oh, you noticed I’m not from here?”

“Yeah, well—”

No matter how naturally you behave, you stand out as an outsider.

Then she revealed things about herself, little by little.

Her occupation was photography, and she apparently traveled the world taking pictures. She mainly took photographs of animals, contributing to research into their ecosystems from time to time as the mood struck her.

It was a total coincidence that she was visiting that city on exactly that day.

And it was also a total coincidence that she was drinking alcohol next to me.

“It’s fate, huh?” She chuckled deviously and shot me a sidelong glance. “If you don’t mind, let me take your photo next time.”

“It’ll cost you.”

“That’s a no from me.”

“Well it’s a no from me, too, then.”

I turned her down.

When I hit her with a clear refusal, she just laughed and said, “But I thought a traveler would let me take her picture...”

According to her, the people in the region didn’t think very highly of photographers. There were some places where they looked upon her with suspicion just because she was a photographer.

“One place called the Principality of Alessari is especially harsh. You see, because of a scandal caused by some photographer from somewhere, they have a very poor opinion of the entire profession.”

“Certainly seems that way.”

“Oh. You know about it?”

“I’ve been there, just once, about a month ago.”

She was talking about the scandal caused by the photographer named Sario.

Sario had taken photos depicting the overhunting of creatures known as

angiers and had distributed them widely throughout the land. I'd heard the people there had gotten a terrible shock from those photos.

The angiers were beloved animals, kept as pets in the Principality of Alessari, so the people there got very upset to see them being handled so violently.

And then, as the photographs spread, the people noticed something.

They noticed that Sario's photographs were taken much too precisely and from very close up.

Before long, a rumor spread that the photographer named Sario was secretly connected to the poachers, and the people ended up turning on her.

"Apparently, the photographer was driven out of the country."

But I don't know all the details, since I only stayed in the Principality of Alessari for a few hours.

At least, they were saying that the photographer who caused the scandal wasn't around anymore.

Well, once everyone knew her name and her face, and that she had caused the terrible uproar, I suppose she couldn't live there comfortably anymore.

"Do you think what she did was right?" the photographer beside me asked.

She must have been curious, as a member of the same profession.

"Who knows? It's hard to say," I answered with a shrug. "But I don't think she feels any regret over causing a scandal in her hometown."

Considering that she called herself a good-for-nothing.

"Oh, do you know the photographer in question?"

"I met her, just once."

"What kind of person was she?"

"A strange one."

Her personality changed when she was taking photographs, and she called herself a good-for-nothing. But ultimately, she couldn't overlook other people doing bad things. Or so I thought, until she arranged her own counterfeit photos

and created a big scandal. She was a greedy person who wasn't picky about her methods if it meant she achieved her objective.

"Do you know where that photographer is now?" the woman beside me asked.

She must have been curious, as a fellow photographer.

But I hadn't seen Sario again after running into her that one time. Naturally enough, I didn't know where she was; in fact, I wasn't even sure she was still alive.

And so—

"Who knows?"

—I shook my head.

"Maybe she changed her name and her hair and decided to live as a normal photographer or something."

That was all the answer I gave.

Before me, the black-haired photographer just nodded. "Oh, I see." Then, after we had continued making pointless small talk with each other for a while, it suddenly dawned on me.

Come to think of it, she and I haven't given our names yet, not even once.

"Oh, right, I haven't introduced myself yet, have I—?"

I was sure she must have been thinking the same thing as I was.

She put on a thin smile.

"My name is Kaena. How do you do?"

She extended her hand toward me.

Kaena.

It's my first time meeting you, isn't it?

So I took her hand and responded:

"Nice to meet you."



Afterword

Before we get into the afterword, first let me start with a story from the time when we were making the second drama CD.

Since the recording of the second CD was taking place at a certain spot in Tokyo, my editor and I, plus Azure, decided to meet up at the nearest train station prior to the recording and travel to the studio together.

I'm impatient, so I arrived at the station a little bit before our meeting time, and so did my editor. I had nothing to do until it was time, and I had no idea what to do with myself, so I idly watched the people arrive at the station as I waited for Azure.

That's when it happened.

There's someone with the same shoes as me...!

I spotted a person among the crowd coming down the stairs into the station who was wearing exactly the same shoes as I was.

This was a station in Tokyo, where countless numbers of people flowed through early in the morning. And among the flood of different shoes, as numerous as the stars, it was not unusual that someone would have bought the same shoes as me. And yet running into someone who had put on exactly the same pair as me and come to the same station at the same time of day seemed like an incredible coincidence. So I felt like it was fate, and at the same time, I felt a sense of fellowship. It made me want to rush right up to the person and engage in some shoe talk, whispering right in their ear, "*Heh-heh-heh, those shoes are great, aren't they...? Where did you buy them? I got mine at a store nearby—*" I didn't even really like the shoes that much, but I felt like doing something like that. That was how moved I was. I felt like the stars had aligned.

Now, just what kind of person do you suppose was wearing those shoes?

My chest swelled with feelings of camaraderie that I had wholly invented in

my own mind. I tilted my gaze and, starting at his feet, looked up until I could see the man's face.

“.....”

It was Azure.

Never mind the feelings of fellowship; we were actually just work fellows...

What a surprise for Shiraishi...

So we went to watch the recording session in our matching shoes. Thankfully, none of the staff or voice cast noticed. Or maybe they did notice and just decided not to mention it.

By the way, after the recording session, the head editor, myself, and Azure had a wrap party, and since Azure and I had exactly the same shoes, it caused some confusion when it was time to leave, and we couldn't tell whose shoes were whose. For the record, despite being sober, I nearly put on Azure's shoes and went home in them.

Now that I've touched on something that happened at the recording of the second drama CD, I'd like to talk about the third CD.

I get by with two pairs of shoes for private use, and one of those pairs is the one that miraculously matches Azure's. And the other pair are sneakers made out of (black) suede. Thinking that it would of course be inexcusable to match Azure every time, I switched to wearing my sneakers after the second CD incident, but I actually recently found out that my sneakers are also a match, for a pair owned by the publisher. Since it became clear there was no escape for me, I ended up deciding to attend the recording of the third CD wearing the shoes that match Azure's. I'm sure you're wondering why I didn't buy different shoes, if matching bothered me, but the thing is that I forgot.

And so on the day of the recording—

For the third recording, we went straight to the studio without meeting up beforehand. As usual, I was impatient, so after waiting restlessly in a nearby café for two hours, I entered the studio.

I took off my coat, sat down, and sighed.

I didn't really care about something like matching shoes. I was just a little embarrassed about it for some reason. I waited several minutes, thinking absentmindedly that there was no helping it if we did match.

Azure entered the room.

I stood up and greeted Azure with a bow as he took off his coat.

"Good morning!"

With an air of innocence, I checked his feet.

The shoes Azure had on that day were different shoes than he had worn to the recording of the second drama CD.

We had avoided wearing matching shoes. That meant there shouldn't be any concern about not knowing whose shoes were whose when we went out drinking after the recording session.

Feeling relieved, I looked up.

By the way, the outfit I was wearing that day was very, very simple.

And the outfit Azure was wearing that day was also a simple ensemble.

"....."

To make a long story short, Azure and I were wearing matching outfits that day.

Oh no, we wore matching shoes to the second recording, and now we match again somehow, ha-ha-ha, I thought. It was the third CD recording, and never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined we would match everything above the shoes.

As you might expect, it was inevitable that people noticed, since there were two of us right next to each other looking exactly the same. It was only natural that someone made a passing comment about our outfits. "You look sort of like twins..."

Aw, it was a coincidence. Really.

And so the strange spectacle of having two people standing beside each other greeting everyone in exactly the same outfit unfolded at the time of the third

recording. Already, given the circumstances, I knew there was no way we were going to make a good impression, no matter what kind of greeting we offered. No matter how I dressed up my words or tried to make myself look cool, the clothes I was actually dressed in were a perfect match for my buddy's. Of course, the humor of the situation far exceeded any attempt at coolness I could muster. It would have been way more natural for us to go easy on the greetings and launch into a two-man comedy act instead.

Anyway, the recording of the third CD got started with a strange coincidence involving matching outfits, but as far as the main event of the recording—it was really fun.

Recently, I have been very busy, and I find myself without a moment to catch my breath. Somehow, my life changed just like that without my noticing. But it's truly a joyful thing for me that, in the middle of all that busyness, I get to be present at the recordings for the drama CDs and watch the actors breathe life into the *Journey of Elaina* characters. I think it's an amazing opportunity to encounter new aspects of the characters.

During the first recording, due to my extreme nervousness, I felt like I might die the moment I made eye contact with the cast. But lately, I've gotten somewhat used to it. I think if I was standing about five kilometers away, I would have no problem making eye contact.

All right, that was my story about the third drama CD.

Personally, I think about ten or twenty minutes per story is probably just right for a drama CD. *The Journey of Elaina* has always been a series of short stories, and I think it's more in keeping with the books to have several stories on one CD (though there's also the reason that I want to write dialogues between various characters).

Actually, the third drama CD had the most lines of any drama CD so far, and I did wonder, *Is the length of this going to be okay...?* and I felt hopeless because I knew, *But there's nothing left that can be cut...* But thankfully, everything worked out. The plans for the fourth drama CD are already made, and this time I'd like to try to keep the length a little more reasonable...

And next time, when it's time for the recording, I will be filled with trepidation

as I pick out my clothes and shoes, terrified that anything of mine might match with anyone else.

I digress, but I recently purchased a pair of old-school Vans as my third pair of shoes. I was thinking that with such incredibly basic shoes, I could escape criticism, like, “*Well, they’re incredibly basic, right? Can’t help matching somebody! Right?!*”

So now that I’ve discussed my recent circumstances, I’d like to get into the comments on each chapter of *The Journey of Elaina*, Vol. 12.

My comments on each chapter are packed with spoilers, so if you haven’t read the book yet, skip over them!

- Chapter 1 The Story of a Certain Traveler

A prologue sort of story.

Now that *The Journey of Elaina* is set to become an anime, I discussed with my editor the possibility that people might start reading the books from the latest issue. This chapter was about giving a rough idea of what kind of story this is and what kind of person our protagonist, Elaina, is. The fact that it’s not one continuous story is one of the nice things about a book made up of lots of short stories.

- Chapter 2 An Expedient Species

I’ve heard that genes evolve in order to leave behind as many copies of themselves as possible.

Apparently, creatures and viruses that invade the bodies and minds of their hosts and control them are called parasites. But many of these parasites bring about the death of their hosts. Hairworms cause their cricket hosts to drown themselves, and a mouse infested with toxoplasma stops fearing the smell of cat urine and then gets eaten because it’s easy to catch. There are all sorts of other kinds, too, but most of them pretty much have traits like this. It seems that parasites can even reproduce by causing the death of their hosts through methods like suicide or predation. For example, the toxoplasma from the mouse I brought up earlier multiplies inside the cat’s organs, propagating its offspring by mixing into the animal’s excrement. I suppose in a way, the

parasite's murder of its host is not unlike the mating of animals or the pollination of plants.

With all that in mind, the dark elves that show up in *The Journey of Elaina* must consider the species known as human beings to be truly an expedient species. That was that story. Honestly, I've wanted to write this story for a long time, and I agonized over it, so it's a relief to finally have it done.

- Chapter 3 A Tale of Three Cities: The Reason for the Price

I rarely go to the discount store, but every once in a while, a drink whose product concept was too out-there to really gain popularity is left on sale for a super-cheap price, you know? I actually kind of like those peculiar drinks, so I sometimes buy them, but when I try drinking them, they're not that good. Even though I remember them being a little tastier back when I bought them at a convenience store for the standard price, they are actually pretty gross. It's as if all the magic has been removed. I think it might be because they were nasty when I bought them at the convenience store, too, but since I paid full price for them, I convinced myself they tasted good. By the way, this phenomenon is apparently called cognitive bias.

- Chapter 4 The Exorcist and the Demon

I think life is probably more fun if you have the open-mindedness to enjoy something, even knowing it's a lie. This is changing the subject, but recently, advances in technology have made it easier to spot blatant hoaxes. Maybe that's why you don't see many programs about ghosts or horror stories anymore. Around the time I was in middle school, there were a bunch of shows about exorcisms. The victim would be tied to a chair, and the priest would order them to "Tell me your name!" In a distressed voice, the victim would croak out, "Lu-Lucifer...!" After which Lucifer was simply banished by the priest. Well... There are different degrees of lies, now aren't there...?

- Chapter 5 A Tale of Three Cities: Because It's Something People Recommend

I don't need to go out of my way to tell you that this is one of those "grass looks greener on the other side" kind of stories, but to put it simply, that's the kind of tale it is. It's one of the very rare instances where the character of Mina appears. Actually, I've been waiting for the right time for her to appear ever

since Volume 5, but I couldn't quite work her in, and it ended up taking me seven volumes.

- Chapter 6 Lucille Who Never Smiles

This one's just a story about making a girl who doesn't smile smile. Nothing more and nothing less; that's really all there was to it. Personally, I'm pleased with how it ended. I feel like this is the first time I've written a character who doesn't properly speak as a guest character... (Except for Gardenia and the other characters who only talked through writing.)

- Chapter 7 A Tale of Three Cities: A Story of Something of Value

Miss Broom always shows up at key points.

I'm changing the subject, but apparently there are cancer treatments in this world that, although extremely expensive, have absolutely no basis in medicine. And yet strangely, great numbers of people seek out such treatment methods. I touched on this a little bit in the "The Reason for the Price" part of the tale of the three cities, but when something is very expensive, sometimes, strangely enough, that makes people feel like it's really effective, as if it's been treated with magic. In actuality, the real medical treatments that can help many people for a low price are the result of many scientists working around the clock. So it's not necessarily true that they are cheap because they are not effective. At least, that was what was written in an article I read a while ago. That made me think.

The tale of the three cities basically deals with the subject of those sorts of price differences, and the three chapters together make up one story. By the way, the city names were made A-B-C (provisional names) because I wanted to make it easy to understand. It would have been fine to give each city a real name, but it seemed like that would make the connection between the chapters less clear.

- Chapter 8 Good-for-Nothing Sario

I'm convinced that villains look like villains from one angle, but that when you view them from a different angle, they look like good people. I feel like I've written similar stories countless times. I've never encountered someone who was completely steeped in evil to the bottom of their heart. Since from a single viewpoint, the world and the people in it can look as evil or as good as you like,

I'm of the opinion that it's not wise to hate anything. But even though I'm fully aware of that, I do have days when I just can't stand something. I'm only human. At times like those, if I go on an outing and escape from reality, I feel a little bit better, so that's what I recommend.

- Chapter 9 The Story of a Certain Photographer

This is the epilogue to Sario's story. I really would have preferred to conclude her story within Chapter 8, but Chapter 8 was leaping willy-nilly through the chronological order, so out of necessity, I had to stretch it out into an epilogue.

Right, so that was *The Journey of Elaina*, Vol. 12.

This time, I have ten pages for my afterword, so I took the liberty of tossing in this and that and various other things that I haven't gotten a chance to talk about lately. However many pages I'm granted for the afterword, I'm going to fill them with endless prattle and as many comments on each chapter as the page count will allow, so I hope you'll bear with me in the future.

Oh yeah, and I think more information about the anime version of *The Journey of Elaina* that's coming will be made available soon. So feel free to keep checking for new information at any time! There's an official Twitter account, too!

With all that said, I think it's about time to move along to the acknowledgments.

To M, the head editor.

Thank you, as always. Next time for sure, I'm going to try to get you the manuscript early...

To Azure.

Thank you for always drawing such adorable illustrations. The cover image for the special edition was especially awesome. (They're all awesome, though!) From now on, I'll let you know ahead of time what clothes I'm going to wear to the recording session...

To Itsuki Nanao.

Thank you as always for creating the wonderful comic book version. It makes

me truly happy that I can see Elaina's various expressions in the comics.

To all of the staff involved with the drama CDs.

Thank you so much for your work on the most recent one. I was really glad to hear you say that you thought the script was interesting when I met you for the first time at the recording site. I look forward to working with you again on the fourth CD.

To all of the cast members working on the drama CDs.

No matter how many times I listen to the back-and-forth between Elaina and Miss Fran, or the sibling bickering between Amnesia and Avelia, or the investigations that Saya and Sheila conduct, or the narration by Miss Fran, it never gets old. I'm always thinking about how lucky I am to have such amazing people acting the parts as I listen to your recordings. I'm looking forward to working with you again on the fourth CD.

To all of the staff involved with the anime.

I'm so sorry that I haven't found an opportunity to meet you all. I'm really moved by your gorgeous art and character designs and by the way you brought to life the parts of the story that didn't have any pictures in the original books. Thank you so much.

That does it. *The Journey of Elaina* is still ongoing, so I'd be delighted if I could count on your continued support.

And I can't wait to watch the anime, too.

All right then, let's meet again in Volume 13. See you later!

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